# THE LONE SWALLOWS

## *NEW NOVELS*

PENDER AMONG THE RESIDENTS — FORREST REID

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THE BEST GIFT OF ALL — ROWAN GLEN

AS OTHERS SEE US — MARMADUKE PICKTHALL

THE PIT-PROP SYNDICATE — FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

ROSEANNE — E. MARIA ALBANESI

# THE LONE SWALLOWS

*by*

HENRY WILLIAMSON

"The beautiful swallows, be tender to them, for they symbol all that is best in nature and all that is best in our hearts."

*Richard Jefferies.*


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## COMPILER'S NOTE

Most of the papers in this volume are published for the first time. A few have appeared in *The Daily Express*, *The London Evening News*, *The Field*, *The Saturday Review*, *The Outlook*, *The English Review*, and *The Wide World Magazine*. I am indebted to the Editors of these publications for permission to reprint them; and I am personally grateful to Sir Theodore Cook, of *The Field*, and to Mr. Austin Harrison of *The English Review* for their encouragement and kindness in criticising and printing my earliest essays.

"Winter's Eve," the first attempt to describe the common sights and sounds of the English countryside, I include for reasons of sentiment. Nature writing, I have been told by some authorities on art, is regarded as a trivial thing—"nature,"

according to those people, is but a frail base for art-creation. Those authorities, I discovered, did not know the difference between a linnet and a celandine. And they did not want to be told. But I imagine that, as children, they would have been delighted to see a linnet's woven nest, and to be told that the celandine is the first of the wild flowers to fashion after a dreary winter a gold cup in the February meadows and woods. My own belief is that association with birds and flowers in childhood —when the brain is plastic and the mind is eager—tends to widen human sympathy in an adult life. The hope of civilisation (since we cannot remake the world's history) is in the fraternity of nations, or so it seems to myself, whose adolescence was spent at the war; the hope of amity and goodwill of the nation is in the individual—in the human heart, which yearns for the good and the beautiful; and the individual is a child first, eager to learn, but unwilling

to be taught. Therefore it would appear that the hope of civilisation is really in the child. Sometimes heredity may be too great a handicap, but a sweet environment is a gradual solvent of inherited vice; at least it will prevent hardness, whence springs un-understanding, and hate. It was on a Sunday in May, 1920, in a tramcar at Catford, a south-eastern suburb of London, that the seed of this thought was sown by the sight of children returning to the slums after a day in the country. How eager they were: and how their parents were happy! Immediately afterwards, in a visionary fervour, or, may be because I was very young, I wrote "London Children and Wild Flowers," which Austin Harrison published, with Walter de la Mare as god-parent.

H. W.

Skirr Cottage,
11*th November*, 1921.

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# THE LONE SWALLOWS

ALONG the trackless and uncharted airlines from the southern sun they came, a lone pair of swallows, arriving with weakly and uncertain flight from over the wastes of the sea. They rested on a gorse bush, their blue backs beautiful against the store of golden blossom guarded by the jade spikes. The last day of March had just blown with the wind into eternity. Symbols of summer and of loveliness, they came with young April, while yet the celandines were unbleached, while the wild white strawberry and ragged-robin were opening with the dog violet. On the headland the flowers struggle for both life and livelihood, the sward is cropped close by generations of sheep, and the sea-wind is damp and cold. Perhaps the swallows hoped to nest, as their ancestors had done centuries since, in

the cave under the precipice at the headland's snout, or that love for its protection after the wearying journey was new-born in their hearts. One cannot say; but the pair remained there.

Days of yellow sunshine and skies blue as their wings greeted them. Over the wave crests and the foamed troughs they sped, singing and twittering as they flew. Kestrel hawks with earth-red pinions hung over the slopes of the cliffs, searching with keen eyes for mouse or finch, but the swallows heeded not. Wheatears passed all day among the rabbit burrows and the curled cast feathers of the gulls, chiffchaffs iterated their little joy in singsong melody, shags squatted on the rocks below, preening metal-green plumage and ejecting plentiful fish-bones. The wanderer on the sheep-track, passing every day, joyed in the effortless thrust of those dark wings, the chestnut stain on the throat, the delicate fork of the tail. Winter was ended, and the blackthorn

blossoming—there would be no more snow or ice after the white flowers, fragile as vapour thralled by frost, had come upon their ebon wilderness of spines. The heart could now look forward, not backwards to other fled springtimes. The first swallows had come from distant lands, and three weeks before the winged hosts were due! One of the greatest of nature-writers wrote, "The beautiful swallows, be tender to them." In fancy Richard Jefferies, too, was wandering on the headland, and watching the early vagrants, breathing the fragrance of the wild thyme that came like an old memory with the wind. Always dearly loved are the singing birds of passage, returning with such feeble wings to the land that means love and life to them, and love and life and beauty to us. Each one is dear; all the swallows returned are a sign and a token of loveliness being made manifest before our eyes.

The early April days passed, like the

clouds in the sky, softly and in sunlight, merging into the nights when Venus lighted the western seas, and belted Orion plunged into the ocean. In the sheltered places the arums grew, some with hastate leaves purple-spotted, and showing the crimson *spadix* like the tip of a club. Brighter grew the gorselands, till from the far sands they looked like swarming bees gold-dusty from the pollen of the sun. The stonechat with white-ringed neck and dark cap fluttered into the azure, jerked his song in mid-air, then dived in rapture to his mate perched upon a withered bramble. In a tuft the titlark was building her nest, while the yellowhammer trilled upon a rusted ploughshare in the oatfield.

Sometimes the swallows flew to a village a mile inland, and twittered about an ancient barn with grass-grown thatch, haunted by white owls, and hiding in dimness a cider press that had not creaked in turning for half a century. Once they

were seen wheeling above the mill pond, and by the mossy waterwheel, hovering along its cool gushings and arch of sun-stealing drops thrown fanwise from the mouldered rim. Everywhere the villagers hailed them with delight, and spoke in the inn at nights of their early adventuring. Such a thing had been unknown for many years; the oldest granfer had heard tell of it, but had never actually seen it before. The old man took a poet's delight in the news, and peered with rheumy and faded blue eyes, hoping to see them when tapping along the lane to his "tater-patch." It became a regular thing for the wanderer upon the headland to report their presence when he returned from the high solitude and the drone of the tide, and the yelping cries of gulls floating white in the sunshine above a sea of woad-blue.

Gulls selected nesting sites, and the sea-thrift raised pink buddings from its matted clumps. The ravens rolled in the wind

uprushing from the rocks, and took sticks in black beaks to the ledge where they had nested throughout the years. The male bird watched upon a spar while his mate with throaty chucklings built anew the old mass of rubbish where her eggs would be laid. Sometimes he fed her with carrion filched from a pearly gull by the flashing and sunpointed foam, and she gabbled with pleasure. Ever and anon the fleeing specks of the swallows passed near, winding in and out, floating and diving, "garrulous as in Cæsar's time." Like kittens in distress the buzzards wailed, spreading vast brown canvas that enabled them to sail high among those silver and phantom galleons, the clouds. Steamers passing to the Severn basin left smoke trails on the horizon; the life of the sea and land, wild and civilised, went on; but no other swallows arrived. Light of heart the wanderer watched, and waited. Any day, new born and blessed by Aurora, would

see the arrival, any day now—two dark arrowheads fell with mighty swoop from heaven, arrowheads that did not miss their mark. There was a frail flutter of feathers in the sunshine, a red drop on the ancient sward, a scuttle of terrified rabbits, a faint scream trembling and dying in the blue. Then only the murmur of the sea far below and the humming of the single telegraph wire near the pathway. The peregrine falcons had taken the lone and beloved swallows.

## LADY DAY IN DEVON

THE rooks are now busy in the elms of the churchyard, and drifting thwartwise the wind with sticks for their nests. Sometimes a young male bird comes with food for his mate as she pleaches the twigs with claw and beak; she flutters her wings like a fledgeling, gapes widely, and squawks with satisfaction. Daws come to the trees, perching head to the south-west breeze, ejaculating sharply. Periodical visitants are the starlings, their songs of mimicry swelling with sudden rush and wheezing. One bird has learnt the chattering cry of a kestrel, the mating call, and deceives the rooks into thinking that one of the brown mouse-hawks is near. That rooks are thieves among themselves is well known, stealing sticks from their neighbours. To-day I watched one taking material that a young and

enthusiastic sister brought with difficulty every five minutes or so from the distant beech clump. The thief was an artist, she was subtle, and cunning. A quick hop took her to the young bird's pile, she seized a stick, and drifted upwards into the wind, swung round in a half circle and brought it to her own nest in the same tree with a soft *caa-caa*, as though implying relief at reaching home again. Her mate, judging by his white face, is an ancient bird; he is wise; he does no work; he fetches no food for his toiling wife; but perches near the nest, approving her method of labour, and guarding its results. He is the nearest approach to a bird "fence" that it would be possible to find.

A lane of red mud leads through the beech-clump. Life here is hard, but the celandines show their spoke-rays to the sun and wind-washed heaven, braving the half-gales that come across the Atlantic and twirl the fallen numbers of autumn's

leaves among their yellow flowers. A tawny owl lives in a pollard hornbeam in this clump; he comes regularly at dusk to my cottage and hoots with mournful insistence to the barn owls that roost under the thatch. Rabbits' bones and fur, finches' feathers, and the fragile skulls of mice hang in the crevices of the tree, hundreds of them, some fresh and white, others hidden under the brown dust of decay that trickles from the old tree's dead heart. Tap his home, and he flaps out, pursued by any small birds searching for spiders or grubs in the spinney. The trees are dwarfed, bent by the salt winds; a few larches grew here, but never more the sap will rise and burst in emerald foam on their wispy branches. Constant buffeting with the winds of the ocean has killed them. A magpie is prospecting the mazed brittleness of one of them for a nesting site; she appears nearly every morning.

Beyond the clump is a combe, or valley,

where every year a pair of carrion crows nest. They fly away as soon as they see me, four hundred yards below—they are crafty, and leave nothing to chance. In the stone hedges the celandines, flowers much bigger than those around London, shine like spilled meteor fragments against their leaves. Primroses grow with them, and the white blossom of the wild strawberry, and in places the stitchwort is in bloom. A flock of linnets sings in a hawthorn, a silver twittering of song coming as the wind rests; with a rustling of wings the flock leaves for the bloom of the gorse which everywhere is scenting the air. The apple trees in the orchard close below are beginning to bud, already goldfinches haunt their lichened branches, now fighting with gold-barred wings aflutter, now pausing to pipe sweet whispers of coming vernal glory, when the blossoms shall spill in showers of loveliness. Afar are the Burrows, and over their sogged

wastes the green plovers wheel and fall, uttering wild calls to the wind, while their mates stand below, diving with broad pinions to earth as though they would die for love. High above a buzzard is sailing. To the right a great horse draws a plough against the skyline, and a dozen gulls follow in its wake; behind them trip and whistle four dishwashers, or wagtails. They say in the village that three pairs of ravens are nesting on the headland this year; I have seen but one. In this district a raven has only once been known to kill or "eye-pick" lambs, but that was many years ago, and then their breeding ledge was robbed in revenge. The raven has come near to extermination, like the peregrine falcon; but here both of these mighty fliers rarely molest the belongings of man; the one feeds on offal and dead rabbits that the stoats have left, and the other takes stock doves, oystercatchers, wild duck, snipe, and ring plover. In the early spring they stoop at gulls and diving

birds just for exuberance of spirit. Certainly every tide leaves its dead among the seaweed and the beach-wrack: gulls and auks with their backs torn and ripped by the swift blue-hawks.

## THE INCOMING OF SUMMER

WHERE by the stream the towers of the wild hyacinth bore their clustered bells, sought by that gold-vestured hunchback the wild bee, the willow wren sang his little melody, pausing awhile to watch the running water. The early purple orchids grew with the bluebells, their spurs upraised, their green leaves mottled with purple. Already the blackthorn had put forth its blossoms, a sign of frostless nights and warm days; already the blackbird had planted its nest in the alder bush. Now the year would advance till the grain was bronzed and the red arms of the reaper-and-binder whirled among its baked stems. Following the green and silver windings of the water the blue swallows hovered and fell, but the cuckoo's voice had not yet called from the pheasant coverts. Any

dawn would be welcomed by his mellow note, for over the sea and the land the winged hosts were passing, urged by the love they bore the thicket or the hedgerow that had weaned them, and for which in parched lands they had pined. From the time of the early sweet violet the migrants had been returning, and their journeyings would continue till the time of the first poppy.

The willow birds perched on the wands of the sallows, and the swallows twittered as they glided. Two singing notes, oft repeated, came from an ash-tree where an olivine chiffchaff was piping his simple music. Throughout the gusty winds of March dust-laden and with only the celandines to tell of hope, he had been piping by the brook, a wanderer whose notes would be heard till the blackberries of October. The allotted span of the celandines was over, their rayed spokes of yellow were bleached—the wheatears

were flitting upon the swarded downlands. The flowers had gathered to themselves all the light that the sun of early spring had flung between swift clouds, the seeds were formed, their hopes fulfilled. In their place came wild strawberries and herb robert, the dog-violet and the speedwell.

The meadow grasses were not yet tall enough to sigh at the wind's soft passing, but a red admiral had been joying in the sunlight for many days. Down by the streamlet the moor-hen had woven her rushy nest, bending an arch of withered sedges over her labour to hide the speckled eggs. In the mud of the pebbled shallows her webbed feet left a track as she sought for beetles. Small spoors, the imprint of little claws, showed where a vole had made quick passage across a mud-bank. In the turfy bank its retreats were tunnelled, leading to a domed hollow lined with grasses—here her young would shortly nestle. From the stream and the shallow the rushes

were rising, green spearpoints scarce sturdy enough to conceal the nest of the wild duck. Now they were thin and over-sharpened, as though exhausted by the effort of straining upwards to the light to which the sacrificial flowers would be offered in June; then they would be "thick and sappy," annealed; in winter the cattle would tread their dried stems upon the beaten floors of the shippen.

Over pebbles, wine-stained, gray, rusted and brown, the stream tumbled, around mossy boulders and under branches, swaying dreamily the drowned poa grasses. Brook-trout lurked for the gnats that sometimes brushed the surface with trailing legs. Where the wind was stayed by arch of hazel and willow the midges danced their nuptials, in ghostèd assembly rising and falling. The time of the mayflies was not yet, their brief pageant would be heralded by the myriad trumpets of summer's insects; summer was still shyly virginal. No

sunbeam had yet touched the buttercup, unblazoned was the shield of the meadow by *gules* of poppy, *azure* of cornflower, or *argent* of feverfew. Fragile were the greeneries of the hedge above the brooklet, sweet the primroses under the stubbed roots of the ash-trees. Loveliest is the year when "sumer is icumen in," when the willow wren, slim as he perches on an amber wand, sings all the love in his heart.

Something is moving in the nettles which the bullocks have not trampled. Their hooves have impressed cloven hollows at the marge, but the nettles are unspoiled. A tangled song comes from the middle of the patch, incoherent and unceasing. The pointed leaves quiver as the motion continues. Presently a little bird with a fawn breast jerks into the air, flutters a moment, and then disappears. It is a whitethroat, and till now his presence in the countryside was unknown. Ecstasy, uncontrolled and rising from his heart like

the spring in the hillside, has all his being enthralled. The trembling of the nettles and the husky voice continue, and a brown bird passes over the nettled sanctuary. It is a wren carrying a leaf to the house that after two days' labour is nearly built. Swiftly he pushes the oak leaf into place, then mounts a dry bramble jutting above the pleached ash and hazel branches, and from his pine-spindle of a beak pours a ringing melody. The fervour of the crackey's song is so intense that in comparison with his size and minute cocked tail it appears an impossibility—he is a Swinburnian singer. His vernal feelings are so strong that in the interval of vocal exclamation he fashions many spare nests, most of them loosely and carelessly made. The shanty in the dead ivy around the oak is constructed of withered leaves that harmonise with its surroundings; he has another in a hayrick near, formed of dried grasses; a third in a green bush composed

wholly of moss fetched from a bank in the sunken lane.

The whitethroat and his mate have jerked away, the willow bird slipped upstream, the cock-wren with cocked tail is stuttering an alarm. Down by the water's edge a reddish animal nibbles a shoot held in its paws. Perceiving that it has no hostile bearing, the wren is silent. At the slightest movement the vole will dive with a musical and hollow plop into the water and swim to concealment. Quietly it finishes the sappy stalk, then creeps under a thick stem of cow-parsley, the florets of which are budding. Finches pass over, calling to each other, and a silver chirruping announces a wagtail. He alights on a smooth gray boulder, slender in outline and poised on fragile legs, flaunting a breast of daffodil. The hen-bird follows, and they perch together. Their long tails move as though to maintain an earthly balance, so faery-frail are they. She leaves him, flitting in

wavy flight to another boulder. He follows, but she is restless. Downstream they pass, stopping for a moment on a jutting fragment of rock in the stone hedge, peering into a cavity. Throughout the summer the gray wagtails will haunt the brook, for within the cave foundations of their nest are already laid, fibres sought inside the pollard willows.

Those galleons the clouds have sailed into the north-eastern main, and no canvas or furled rigging are visible. For weeks no treasure of rain has been brought for the earth to spend with lavish abandon on verdant raiment, no largesse of shower has been thrown to the humble chickweed or vagrant sorrel. But on the surface of the land green things are stained with sap and charged with alchemising sunbeams. The secret of the philosopher's stone, anciently sought to change baser metals to gold, has remained undiscovered through the ages, nor has the countryman ever found the crock of spade guineas at the rainbow's end.

These would bring luck; even now we strive to find their counterpart. In the cities, perhaps: youth storing the gold that one day will mean happiness: towards the evening of life, maybe, with sight dulled to a flower and the song of the swallow never heard. Sunlight is all to the flowers. It distils for them their scents and sweet nectars, it fashions their petals and ambrosial pollen. The sun loads the galleons of the airy fullness with the rain drawn from the ocean, unlading its cargoes upon the million wharves of the earth.

Peeping from ivy-bowered seclusion for sight of flashing hawk, a robin slips like a copper oakleaf from its nest. Inside the lined cup of bent and horsehair five naked fledgelings lie sleeping. By the pale cuckoo flowers the mother searches, capturing with swift movements insects that toil among the rootlets. She returns with a beakful, but her children will not rouse from slumber. A chirping comes from the hedge above,

where a drab hedge-sparrow has her brood. She inspects with grave demeanour their orange gapes and divides the food among them. They gulp, then plead vainly with hoarse squeaks for more. Over the hedge she drops, joining the host of wrens, white-throats, blackbirds, thrushes, and red mice, all looking for food.

The rising club of the wild arum is purple within its sheath; soon the "lords-and-ladies" will attract the children to their "river." The stream is singing a mazed melody of soft sounds; by listening intently each can be distinguished. Different notes arise from the shattering of a crystal bubble upon the stones, the hollow dripple of a pebble rolled over the shallows, the foamy swirling past willow trunks moss-covered, the splashing into dwarfed trout-pools. Where a sunbeam loads the ripples a gold network drifts over the sand, holding a twig in its eddy; or the wind stirs the leaves, and a million sunpoints are thrown

upwards like a silvery flight of starlings. From the mud precious doubloons have been raised by the root-divers of the king-cups, and are cast thickly by the bank.

Behind the hedge the gorse grows, stretching up the hill in spiky profusion of rusted jade and orange. Under the roots a colony of rabbits has been founded, and the does are scratching fur from hind legs to line the dug-outs where their little ones will be yeaned. A longtailed titmouse spies a furry fragment, seizes it, and carries it to her nest in a distant bramble. With faint rustling of wings a linnet alights upon a bush, and sings to the mate who is weaving her cradle. Among the apple blossoms below, soft cadences are borne in the sunshine—the goldfinches cannot cease the telling of their happiness. A greenfinch answers with wistful, long-drawn note, and a corn bunting repeats his song again and again. Primroses, daisies, and the scentless violet grow on the turf

under the spinney, where the larches have concealed their brittleness with emerald buds. A high twitter comes from one, and almost immediately a bird smaller than a wren flits moth-like to the ground. Its crest is a pencil-mark of fire. At the extreme end of a branch a ball of moss and lichen moulded with spider webs and caterpillar cocoons is suspended. Here the Golden-crowned Knight and his lady love will flitter throughout the days of summer, leading their children from the swinging castle as the voice of the cuckoo falters in June. Flocks of these birds roamed the pine forest during leafless days, when their shrill needle-lances of sound scarce pierced the wind's moaning. Now in coppices and spinneys they seek the unchivalrous spider and the insects that crawl upon the sprays. Here under the trees is shade and solitude. I will stay and dream. But I want more beauty, and am restless; to me floats the voice of the stream for ever

calling; I must return to the sunlit waters and the bended sedges.

All the loveliness of fled summers returns to the mind. The spread disk of the dandelion, so richly hued, is more beautiful now, bearing in its colour so many hopes of the past. A common flower, a despised weed, yet a symbol of that pulsing golden happiness that is the heritage unclaimed of so many. The bees and the birds need no philosopher's stone, they have something better in the sweet air, they live every moment happily. In careless childhood the dandelions were beheaded with a stick; they are now a token of joy, these common weeds, taking shallow root wherever the wind flings their seeds. Summer to me would be incomplete without the dandelions. For what they symbol, would that there were more in the drifted dust of the cities. The music of the brook has risen from a murmur to a dull thunder, and a humming sounds under the maples. The miller has

lifted the weedy hatch, and the ponderous stone wheels are crushing the grain. In the pond the tench lie unseen, but the light flames upon the scarlet fins of the roach as they pass. Silently the flume slides forward, then gushes into the troughs of the great elm waterwheel. Jets of water spurt from its old mossy planking, and a rain of drops is flung from the trundling rim. Inside the miller feeds the hoppers, and upon a beam perch two swallows, unheedful of the shake and the thunder. A dust floats in the millhouse, hazing the glass windows and giving to the cobwebs a snowy purity—embroidering the robes of the corn-spirit. For centuries the wheat has been ground between the fixed bed-stone and the runner, for centuries the stream has worked for mankind, its splashing imprisoning the light of the southern sun falling athwart the wheel. I thought of the men that in the past had laboured for the wheat, of the times the millpeck had

grooved the stones, and the millstaff proven their setting. The millwheel is very old and will soon turn no more, but still the human sorrow and the hunger goes on.

Across the way stand dark yew trees beneath whose stillness the grave-stones, patched with gray and orange lichens, throw their shadows upon the grass. The suns of summer have bleached them, autumnal rains washed them, wintry frosts worked graven patterns upon the ancient letterings. The stream flowed then as now, many times had the swallows returned to their mortared houses under the rafters and up the broad chimneys—think of all the beauty repeated. Centuries of apple blossom, scented beanfields and floating thistledown; all the happiness of harvest garnered; all the hunger and the misery of man, ever striving with his neighbour. Can you not see what the dandelion tells? The swallows on the beam know no passage of time—they look forward to no happiness—they

have no illusions—all is for them now. The calendar is not for them. Joyous they are, and wild; their hopes are not for to-morrow—the to-morrow of the mounded earth—but for to-day.

Summer comes in with their return, though the calendar shall deny. Summer: the very name brings to the heart a feeling of joy. There is so much for all, so much beauty of thought stored in the raggedest dandelion. Sunshine, the swallow, and the celandine: to know these in childhood is to take to the heart the glory of summer for ever.

# HAUNT OF THE EVEJAR

## *i*

WHEN the first white flake falls from the hawthorn the immigrant birds of passage all have come to the countryside. Almost the last to arrive this year on the south-western coast of England were the mysterious nightjars, birds ever surrounded by romance on account of their weird song and phantom habits; and for me, after the experience I had in the late spring, birds of wonder and having a special claim to my affections.

It was night, and on the broad smooth sands, whence the tide had ebbed, shone a curved moon. As I passed by the ocean's edge its outline shook in the sandy pools, blackened and tarnished by seaweed and still foam-bubbles. No clouds drifted in heaven, there was no wind, the stars were pale in the luminous sky. Somewhere

in front of me a curlew, disturbed at his nocturnal feeding, whistled plaintively. A mile away lay Baggy like a badger asleep.

High above this promontory is an established air-line, or hereditary route for immigrant birds. Along this track travel the chiffchaffs and wheatears in March, the martins, warblers, and all the singing hosts in April. Sometimes the night wind bears a million feeble cries as the tired travellers pass over. It is a place of enthralling wonder in the youth of the year—and of sadness when autumnal days bring a weary return.

The night was quiet, the wavelets broke on the sand, a great sigh filled the air. From a sighing it swelled to a rushing of wind, it grew in volume like a drift of leaves in wintry blasts. Then soft thuds overbore the strange noise. I stood still. From afar and near came little croakings, as though of exhaustion and pain. Dark bunches lay on the sands. I picked one up;

it was warm and feathery, its wings fluttered feebly. The nightjars, called of olden time goatsuckers, on account of a wide gape and owl-like eyes, had returned to the land for their yearly nuptials.

There were hundreds of them on the shore. All were too weak to move. I was filled with a great tenderness for them; they showed no fear; I liked to think they knew I would not harm them. The night went on; an owl bayed on the gorse slopes behind. Soon they left, with flapping flight, sometimes hopping. Towards dawn the valley and the hills were filled with their notes rising and falling like the whirring of a spinning wheel, the love song of the evejar.

The bee-swallow, as the nightjar is also called, pairs for life. It is a faithful idealist, like the owl, the falcon, and the long-tailed titmouse. It feeds on moths and chafer-beetles; and lays two eggs among the bracken.

Next morning the sun burned in an azure sky. The gulls wheeled over the surf, seeking poor soddened bundles of feathers that only a little while since had been filled with hope and spurred by love to cross the ocean, but had fallen into the water and been drowned.

*ii*

Returning from inland fields, three gulls with tranquil evening flight passed over the hill towards the headland. A sheep path wound irregularly over the hill, amongst the heather and the uncurling brakeferns. From here the western ocean was seen afar, until it met the clouded heaven. A subdued roar, a growling under-current of sound, floated up the hillside, although the sea was calm. Night and day, for thousands of years, the same ceaseless mutter of the shifting tides upon the sands, the same pounding of the headland as the tons

of gray-green water slid over the rocks and into its hidden caverns.

A small wind moved the heather, and shook a dog-violet with its face turned to the westering sun. It was the tail of the sea-breeze. The air over the fields was cold, and soon it would move down to the sands to explore the darkling sea still warm with the fervour of the sunbeams. A late bee droned among the birds-foot trefoil on the pathway, eager to gather more honey for the winter. The yellow flowers grew low down, and some were stained with deep, tawny orange, as though Antares, the dull red star of summer, had joined its blessing of colour with the greatest gift of beauty and life bestowed by the sun. Near them grew the germander speedwell, also lowly (for the salt winds that sweep the hill care nothing for the humble things of the earth) their sweet blue eyes turned in wonder to the great flower of the sky. A lark with crest upraised waited upon a

hummock of mould thrown up by a rabbit —her nest was somewhere near, hidden in a tangle of burnet-rose. The bee left the trefoil, and droned away down the hill. A blackbird sang in the valley below, where gorse, blackthorn, bramble, and stunted holly choked an ancient waterbourne between the steep hills. It was evening, and he chanted to the departing splendour. Alone sang the sable artist, serene on a twig of blackthorn, having no illusions about life, fretted by no unnecessary labour or research, for ever happy in the sunshine or sleeping restfully as the stars burned above the lonely valley.

Over the sea a golden beam of light trailed from a cloud and lit the gray waters. The massed vapours opened and other beams cast their gilt on the waves. A full rigged sailing ship, vague in the distance, entered the sacred gleam and became a barque of glory passing into the unknown. Nearer the shore, where the white lines of

surf crept up the sands, a silver glitter danced and threw a million silver points for the mind to dream upon—as though an Immortal had flung the Golden Fleece for mortal eyes to see. Slowly the sun sank seawards; the beams were dulled; the ship became once more a drab wanderer on its human mission; a wild mew came down from heaven. With dark wings motionless, a buzzard sailed circlewise, although the hour of hunting was over. Higher and higher the great bird soared, controlling the winds of evening. In his mastery of the air he joyed, as though desiring to outsoar the stars that soon would glimmer over a quiet world. Below on the flats a flock of ring-plover ran to their feeding; their nests were among the pebbles and bleached seaweed near the dunes of the Burrows. Although unseen, their presence was known by the sweetness of their call-notes.

Like a cannon-ball heated to a crimson

glow was the sun behind the vapours where a fume of vague light appeared over the hills to eastward. More sinister grew the outline of the headland, a beast replete and resting its shaggy head on sunken paws. No gulls drifted to their nocturnal roosting; the buzzard had plunged into the hidden pinewood to his eyrie. Here a vast collection of sticks, rabbits' bones, rats' tails, beetle skins and skulls of voles, carried there during a score of years, and resting in a fir, supported his brooding mate and her three blotched eggs.

When the moon was up an evejar rose from the patch of swaled gorse; the creamy marks on its wings and tail were visible in the confluence of light from the gates of heaven —the flood of the moon's white fires and the lingering afterglow over the Atlantic. In anguish at the violation of its hymeneal sanctities the skep-swallow returned and wheeled, beating its wings together. No sound disturbed the silence, no movement

stirred the bracken; only a mouse rustled in the dried brambles, only a chafer beetle, booming through the dusk, sought a dew-drop on a leaf of foxglove. The birds, wedded for all time, returned together and settled on the ground. Then the male bird mounted a stump of gorse, crouched low, and poured forth a reeling song. Like the risp of a grasshopper it came, like a shaken matchbox, like a crowstarver's clappers heard afar. Against the moon the evejar sang his song, whispering huskily of his ecstacies during the pause. Sometimes he waited for the shy answer of his love—she who had journeyed over foreign wastes with him to the remembered valleyside of heather. Soft was her rapturous murmur in the summer night, a gentle reassurance of faith and hope, while the stars shone in the sky above them. Like spun and argent coins the moths went down to the dew-sweetened flowers. Only a reverent watcher and the pure face of the moon saw their espousal.

# A DESERTED QUARRY IN FEBRUARY

MANY celandines are now showing a yellow cup to the sun; a dearly loved flower the celandine, braving the frosts and the loneliness, with only the windrifted leaves of a dead year for company. But its courage makes it beautiful—one of the first of the players in the country orchestra of scent and colour and loveliness to take its seat in the amphitheatre of spring.

On the railway embankment the coltsfoot flowers are rising. How can one be sad when Proserpine will shortly float over the meadows and the woodlands? Now we must lift our hearts above earthly unhappiness, and, with Nature, be joyous.

What matter the fallings of so many leaves in the past when to-day the wild and happy humble bees are passing in the

sunshine, dusty from the pollen of the willow-palm? That the symphony of summer must die in autumn's cadences is inevitable, but now the grass is rising on the crumbled brick rim of the deserted limekiln, and on the pile of chalk a wagtail calls to his mate.

There are the sweet notes of the finches who are fluttering round the weeds of the wasteland, and the distant caw of rooks. A great cloud rushes in the sky; the light is checked. It is cold once more. But every day the sun swings in a higher curve; over the sea the call has gone, and even now the migrants in Africa and Egypt are restless.

Very soon the chiffchaff will pipe his monotonous tune by the lake, and the wheatears will be back on the sward of the downlands. A few weeks and the cuckoo will call in the forest and the swallows glide around the barns and the ricks—"all the living staircase of the spring, step by step, upwards to the great gallery of the summer."

# VIGNETTES OF NATURE

## *i*

From their tussocks upon the sward the pink flowers of the sea-thrift are rising. In one clump a pippit has its nest. The male bird rises high in the air, then falls suddenly, singing his little sweet song; he regains height by mad flutterings, sing-sing-singing all the time. In the matted turf the leaves of the wild thyme give a faint fragrance to the hands. Near by is the skull of a finch, whitened by the sun and the rains. Perhaps the falcons left it there, or one of the buzzards; or a herring gull chased and killed the bird, for gulls are prepared for any villainy. But it is still of use to something. A small spider lurks within its shadowed emptiness.

Reclining by the precipice edge one morning in May I was made curious by a

sudden sweeping of gulls from the cliff-face (where they nest) to the sea. Two or three hundred, white in the sunshine, flapped and glided in a narrow circle by the rocks far below.

I looked carefully, but could see nothing. The spiral of tumbling whiteness and wild noise continued. Something in the green water was causing intense excitement. From all directions other sea-birds swept up; only the black shags squatted indifferently on their favourite rock. Then I saw a smooth, dark form swirling in the water, and heard a hoarse bark; the next moment it had dived. It was a seal. Presently the glistening animal rolled on the surface with a huge dogfish held in his jaws. The gulls screamed; a shrill clamouring broke out as the seal, having bitten the fish in two, threw one part into the air, caught it endways, and swallowed it. Round the Point he swam, while the birds fought over the remains. Presently he appeared with a

writhing conger-eel, which with the greatest ease he bit up into little pieces.

An old fisherman, known as The Tiger, told me that the seal had been there for the last twenty years, and that so far as was known it had no mate. It showed no fear of a boat, and often came up alongside one, inspected it with filmy eyes, and quietly disappeared.

*ii*

In spring the gulls throng to their colony upon the headland. When disturbed, they cry wildly, and circle in the air. Once as I lay in the sun listening to the sea-fret a sharp chattering overbore the wailing of the gulls, and a pair of peregrine falcons swept by.

In but a moment, it seemed, they were half a mile high, flying with incredible swiftness, the male chasing the larger female. From the direction of Lundy

Island a pair of stock doves came across the sea, no mean fliers. They saw the wheeling falcons, and fear doubled their wing-beats.

I watched the hawks in their mad love chase, and then the tiercel saw the doves, closed his pinions, and fell from a thousand feet to the terrified doves in a few seconds. I have seen scout machines diving in France, but the peregrines, one behind the other in echelon, seemed to stoop with greater speed than the fastest of them.

In fear the gulls fled to their crannies in the cliff face. There was a flurry of feathers as the male hawk struck the leading pigeon; he dropped it, swerved, and struck the other, while his mate clawed his first kill. Upwards, with the dove suspended in her talons, she climbed. A heavy black raven flapped to the dove whose blood was staining the green sea as it lifted in the swell.

The peregrine screamed—*check, check, check*—and dropped on the heavier pirate,

who, as the hawk came above him, rolled over and held up his javelin beak. The hawk slipped, regained height, stooped again, was met with the great beak, and then flashed away chattering towards the mainland, followed by his mate.

The next moment a crowd of gulls splashed and quarrelled over the dead pigeon, the raven a sombre fellow amid their whiteness; the rabbits crept from their burrows; and in the sunshine the tiny pippits jerked towards heaven in weak flight, then fell, singing and trilling. And life in the springtime went on.

## HAWK NOTES

A CLOUD from the sea dragged over the mountain so that the buzzards wheeling in the upper air were hidden, and only their mewling cries came down. I suppose they outsoared the cold autumnal vapours; they often sail in the heavenly freeness a mile and more above the earth, broad wings for ever lifted by the winds.

These big hawks are quite common in the West Country; I have seen as many as ten pairs on the wing at once. They are clumsy in the lower air, flapping heavily and beating over the slopes of heather and gorse very much like an owl. But when they attain to high solitude they are transformed. Sometimes as they turn the sun throws a golden lustre on their pinions.

All the British hawks that I have seen —kestrel, sparrowhawk, merlin, peregrine

falcon, buzzard, and marsh harrier—hover to find their prey. Their hovering may be prolonged, or for an instant only. The kestrel leans on the wind, the sparrowhawk (I am referring to those that hunt in the open) dashes down wind, swings up, poises, then dashes down at his prey. The peregrine falcon hangs high above the cliff slope or the inland fields. He and his mate, hunting together, are like two black anchor-heads. Even in a considerable wind they are not disturbed. They remain fixed till something is seen, and then they fall, head first, swifter and swifter, plunging at an enormous rate. If they are within three hundred yards, and the day is still, you may hear the hissing of the stoop. They strike their victim and smash it, or miss altogether, abandoning after three failed stoops. The male usually follows the female should she miss.

Buzzards—spanning nearly four feet—are the most graceful hoverers. They hang,

with wings arched back, a few yards over the rabbit runs through the gorse and the bracken. A fairly steady breeze is needed to keep them stable. I have watched for more than a minute a buzzard hanging thus, moving only its tail. The secret of its poising is that it *falls* continually on the wind, pressing its breast into the flow to counteract the lifting impulse of its wings.

Once I saw a buzzard glide down a hill at about eight miles an hour, a yard from the ground, its feet hanging below, ready to grasp something. Its slow slip downwards ("glide" would convey too rapid a motion) amazed me—it might have been sliding on a wire. Eventually it alighted, and rose with a lashing snake. The reptile was too much for it; the buzzard rushed about in middle air, turning and screaming. Eventually the snake fell to the ground.

I know an eyrie in a pine wood composed of nearly two hundredweight of sticks. It is about seven feet across, and quite as

deep. For half a century and more it has been repaired every spring. Years ago I took the three eggs and lay for a long time in the nest, trembling with joy. The old birds were frightened to come near. I still have those eggs.

The buzzards nested there this year, but I could not climb up. The nest was at a terrible height. Underneath were hundreds of rabbits' skulls, rats' tails, beetle skins, and the feathers of small birds. Perhaps in the years to come when I go there I shall be terrified to see an eager face looking over the nest, and a shrill, triumphant voice exclaiming, "I say, father, I've got three eggs. What a bit of luck!"

## PROPHET BIRDS

One September morning there wheeled a great concourse of gulls over the headland. Through the mist their cries came wild and plaintive. Old men in the village said that it meant a big storm.

I did not believe that birds could prophesy. Having studied the phenomena of nature for many years, I have come to know that everything happens by chance. For instance, during the autumn of 1920 severe wintry weather was forecasted because the hawthorn peggles were plentiful, and the granaries of squirrels were more numerous than usual. Quite a number of journals and periodicals stated these "portents" quite seriously. What illusions! The spring of that year was mild, the hawthorn blossom beautiful, and unravaged by frost. Hence the peggles. As for the squirrels, they

found a goodly fall of beechen mast, and promptly stored it!

But to return to the gulls over Baggy Point. There must have been two or three thousand of them, floating and wailing. "A master storm be cumin'," said the granfers.

All that day, sunlessness and quiet seas. I told the granfers that they were wrong (I am young and self-confident). I explained that their knowledge of nature was not great —had one not told me that swallows sleep in the mud of the river Taw during winter?

But that night clouds came up and hid the stars, the owls called mournfully, the wind shook the elms in the churchyard. A moan under the door, a rattling of the window; the spaniels on my bed whined uneasily. Something was astir—a great silence hollow and foreboding. The chimney tun hummed a little song of rue in the dark; I was instantly awake, and waiting.

A faint roar overbore the near sounds. It was the sea on the rocks two miles away.

Suddenly the rain came, like goose-shot against the window, on the trees: the blast tore at the thatch. All through the night it continued until a gray dawn showed low clouds going over like the canvas of ancient galleons, windburst and tattered.

The next morning tons of seaweed—deep-sea plant, too—heaved and shuddered in the rockpools, while a belt of oil fuel lay on the sand with spars and planks. Had there been a wreck somewhere? No one knew. Certainly it looked as though a cargo had gone overboard, for from the headland one could see another black belt where the walls of gray-green water toppled in foam.

But the gulls? They had gone inland, right up the wide sandy estuary of the river. How did they know, so many hours before, that the storm was coming?

The more one thinks one knows of nature the more open should be the mind of the naturalist. I am learning, or should I say, unlearning?

# A BIRD MYSTIC

EVERY year the ragtailed swallows are fewer, for many are destroyed as the hosts sweep southward in autumn, killed by electric wires on the Continent "for food" (I have seen them, with thrushes and blackbirds, laid out, pitifully small and gentle, in the Italian shop-windows—Nero in hell must be awfully pleased with this sure sign of degeneracy among the descendants of that race of which he declared himself to be "a genius.")

In all the tallats[1] of my Devon village there were but four swallows' nests during the summer of 1921. There are over fifty tallats. Under the rafters are the ruins of nearly two hundred mud mansions—belonging to past summers. Some, indeed, are intact, others utilised by flycatchers, others

[1] The loft over a shippen, or open cattle-shed.

have been selected by wrens for foundations of their domed nests. But only four are being used this year.

Although the swallows are becoming extinct the swifts are increasing. I have met many people who do not know one bird from the other. Yet it is easy to tell.

The swift is the mystic among birds. He is aloof from other birds—apart from life. He is never seen to perch unless it be on the rigging of a ship during migration. The swift is black, he screams shrilly as he darts through the air, his wings are curved like a boomerang. During June I have seen and heard them long after midnight, whole cohorts of them wheeling in the sky, their cries sounding like the thin jingle of a frail chain. I verily believe that some remain on the wing (not the brooding females, of course) from dawn till dawn. They pass my cottage door a foot away from my head, their wings hissing. Under the ancient thatch they nest, plunging, it seems, straight

into the holes. This is necessary, because a swift clings with difficulty; for some reason all its four toes are in front of the foot. Through the dark holes they creep, to reach the nests of saliva, cobwebs, and strawspeck laid like a mouldered saucer on the lath and plaster.

One midsummer eve a great commotion brought me to my doorway. I looked out and saw about half a hundred swifts pursuing a great barn owl, white and slow-fanning, holding in one dropped foot a limp rat. The owls are nesting on the lath and plaster of my cottage, but they do not interfere with the swifts.

When the wheat is nearly ready for the reaping, the swifts begin to think of the journey to Africa. They are among the last birds to arrive here in the spring, but the first to depart (excepting the cuckoo). When the Voice speaks in the night they mount many miles, flying up to the stars, and rush to the south. It is a sad time for

some birds, as the instinct for migration is so intense that if any young are unable to fly they are left. What caused this remorseless migration in the first place, and why does it happen? Nobody knows. It is one of the problems insoluble by research or reasoning; insoluble as the mystery of life itself.

## SAMARITANS

TOWARDS the end of August a pair of house-martins (or eave-swallows—I prefer the name given them by Richard Jefferies) came to my cottage wall, and clung, two slim, black-and-white fairies, to the rough cob surface. Excited twitterings and peckings for a minute, then they flew away. Almost immediately one returned with a beakful of mud, taken from the verge of a ruddle-red pool in the roadway. This was tacked to the wall, close under the ragged fringe of thatch, and away sped the bird as her mate came with his burden. All day they worked, seeming never to feed.

But the nest grew slowly. Perhaps their other muddied cup had been knocked down by boys, or sparrows had seized it; by their intense eagerness it appeared to me that their first brood had failed altogether; there

was something of the frenzy of April in their labour.

In the evening I was amazed by what I saw. The toiling pair had been joined by about a dozen other martins, all bearing beakfuls of mud and grass to the precipitous site. In regular order came mud, quickly moulded and kneaded into place, then came a broken straw, a rootlet, or a twitch of grass. There was just time to place this in position before another bird would arrive. A sweet soft trickle of eagerness fell continually from just above my window. The next morning succour was still availing, and quickly the nest grew. We discussed this in the village, but even the oldest granfer had never heard tell of such a thing before. Toilers in the harvest fields (the "unimaginative labourers") paused and regarded. They were interested, and many pondered the problem with me.

"League o' Nations," grinned one. "There is much friendship among birds," I said. "Aiy, aiy!" agreed another, and

told me in the soft melodious burr of the west country how, in his garden that spring, a robin had fed a nest of hedge-sparrows.

The nest was finished in three days. The lining of feathers was a speedy business, for I scattered a handful on the ground beneath, wishing to give my small aid. I am sure the pair were grateful, for on the fourth day, when I inspected from a ladder, the first egg was laid and the mother was not alarmed by my intrusion.

This intensive construction is not usual. It is not instinctive. It is the result of reason and decency of life in their colonies. Rooks, being amoral, would not help one another. Martins live together in trust and decency. Who, hearing their song (jumbled though it may be), can doubt this.

"League of Nations," a simple man had said to me. I wondered if the hopes of Richard Jefferies will ever be fulfilled. Are not the eave-swallows wiser than us? Sometimes I think so.

# SPORTSMEN OF THE RUBBISH-HEAPS

An old, faded notice board, bearing the legend that trespassers will be prosecuted, leans at a low angle in the hedge; newer and larger boards announce that the land is "admirable for building purposes" and for sale. A gate guards a gap in the hedge, over which bold boys swarm on Saturdays and Sundays when no policeman is in sight.

This preserve, as the crow flies, is about eight miles from London Bridge in a south-easterly direction. It is known to dustmen, who dump their loads upon its once-green fields, and it is also known to certain cockney sportsmen.

Trams and omnibuses pass near its violated woodlands (soon to fall), and yet its possibilities are immense. One Sunday after the war I walked there. Four shooting

parties, complete with dogs, were out after its game. Now, it is not lawful to pursue game on Sundays; nor is it lawful to carry a gun without a licence. But the sportsmen do not mind that. Their guns have sawn-off barrels, and take apart in less than ten seconds. An inside pocket conceals both. As for their dogs—well, although I am a dog-lover and like rough shooting, I would not care to be seen in my own village with such dogs. Every man I met would grin and wink—long, swift dogs they are, a mixture of greyhound and bulldog, chiefly, with various other strains, in order to make them that rare breed—the true lurcher. They never bark. They look slyly at you. Often they grin in dog-fashion, suspiciously, almost a leer.

The sportsmen shoot anything. The last hare has been gone for years, even a rabbit is an unusual sight, almost as rare as a partridge. Generations ago gravel was taken from this estate, leaving shallow pits that

in winter are filled with water. Snipe haunt the pools even now, but they fly up so quickly and then zigzag that it is impossible to hit them.

When a shot is fired guns are hidden, and heads look round for policemen. Sparrows are common game, thrushes and blackbirds are considered the equivalent of pheasants, and the large missel-thrush causes as much excitement and admiration as a first woodcock. A pigeon is as rare as a golden plover, and talked of for weeks.

Sport is not confined to turning-up birds and snap-shooting. The superior ones carry guns; the lowlier fraternity hunt the humble rat, who loves the rubbish heaps. Their holes are everywhere, by broken umbrellas, decrepit straw hats, burst boots, papers, straw, tins, novels, bottles, and old torn shirts. Little terriers quiver with excitement as their masters from Deptford and Shoreditch dig with the crowbars—great excitement this.

Of course the boys must have their shooting parties. Some of them are very skilful with the catapult, and when bored with life they are quite equal to shooting at their elders. Others frequent the pools, wading after efts and sticklebacks. Once I saw a systematic dragging of the ponds with the aid of an old army blanket.

At another end of the preserve bird-catchers are busy with clap-nets and call-birds. Perhaps, if you go near, surly looks will greet you, and you may hear the sound of frail wings ceaselessly fluttering against the bars of tragically overcrowded and small cages. Sometimes goldfinches flit over, their sweet sipping notes rising and falling as they pass to the thistleheads of last autumn; and wistfully comes the answer from the cages as beaks covered with blood are thrust again and again through the bars.

I knew this place years ago, when it was the country. The land is for sale; they are going to build; and the house-squares of

civilisation will be better than the green fields so foully ravaged. But it is nothing to do with me. The happy, happy days of boyhood are gone for ever, with their hopes and their friendships: I shall never go there again, nor shall I hear the wood-larks singing there on a morning of May, nor watch the kingfisher as he draws a sapphire line to the pit where every spring we found his nest. All these are dead: let the houses and the streets obliterate the place for ever.

## RUNAWAYS

MANY pet birds escape from captivity every year, and their distressed owners wonder how they fare. For it is generally understood that the wild creatures resent one who has had long association with man, and usually do their best to kill it. But this, I think, is merely a fiction. It is said that should a canary join a flock of goldfinches, they will taboo it, and even fall upon it and eventually kill it with their beaks. Cases that I have known prove exactly the reverse. I know that a canary among sparrows meets with kindly treatment, perhaps because its appearance is so much more striking than their own dull plumage that like primitive savages seeing a white man for the first time, they are inclined to fall down and worship it.

In Hyde Park one summer I saw a little

green love-bird feeding on seeds of the grass. Now lovebirds are often born in captivity, and their wings are feeble. But in this case the bird had the full power of its wings, and when a boy tried to capture it, it flew away with the speed and agility of a mothflitsie, or jack-snipe.

Even such a bird as the parrot can support itself. There is a rookery in the Lewisham Infirmary Gardens, and for some years past a gray and red African parrot has been flying about with rooks, who seem to welcome its presence.

In flight it resembles a pigeon and a hawk, and its presence among them is all the more mystifying, because the antipathy of rooks to a hawk is well known; they mob one and drive it away whenever seen. The Lewisham parrot escaped before the war, and survived many winters, for I saw it feeding with them in the Recreation Grounds during 1919.

Its curved beak prevents it from digging

in the ground, and in the spring and summer seasons there are few seeds for it to feed on, especially in a crowded suburb like Lewisham. I have watched to see if the rooks feed it, but have never been able to discover.

It would be interesting to know how the spirit of fraternity is born between birds of such widely divergent characteristics. The parrot, however, cannot change its plumage, although it squawks like a young rook and caws like an old one. This may be the explanation of the phenomenon—it can speak the language like a native!

# LONDON CHILDREN AND WILD FLOWERS

*(To W. de la M.)*

THE sphere-blooms of the dandelion have left their anchorage and are floating away in the warm wind. That same wind bears with it a vague scent, for the wild flowers are open to the sun, while the white buds of the may-tree and the lilac-blossom of the keeper's cottage yonder have come before their time. The yellow celandine petals have gone from the meadow, already their little heart-shaped leaves are tinged at the edge with the rust of decay; the brighter buttercups drink deeply of the poured sun-wine, and the red sorrel and pale cuckoo flowers move as the wind comes more strongly. No form of flower life remains for long. When I came here but a few weeks since the celandine was

everywhere; a brave flower, for it rises so early, and is one of the first signs of life stirring again in the cold earth. Then the wood-anemones shone like stars among the brown leaves under the hazel wands and ashpoles of the covert, and on the raised bank near the vermin tree where the marauder stoats and pirate crows hang, the sweet violets drooped their heads, shy in their loveliness. I passed by that bank to-day, but the sweet violets have gone, even as the wood-anemones are withering. Nothing remains for long. But the first swift screams high in the azure, his black curved wings bearing him in fast circles, less graceful than the swallow, who floats on the bosom of the wind, then falls and turns sharply rather than sweeps through the air with the effortless thrusts of the swift. So in the place of the violet's scent I have the scream of the swift, and the cuckoo calls above the dying wind-flowers.

I leant against a wooden fence, placed to

keep the cattle in the meadow from straying into the covert behind, and to guard them from the brook that ran at the edge of the hazels. High nettles hid the lower rails of the fence, growing straight and green, and giving off a heavy odour from their flowers. From afar a cuckoo was calling. but near me the only sounds were the burring of the dusky humble bees at the nettle flowers, and the soft voice of the brook. A great cloud shadow came rushing over the meadow, the wind lost its warmth, and a few drops pattered on the hawthorn. Immediately a blackbird sang on the topmost bough of an oak tree in the wood, and a wren trilled from some hidden bush. Gently the rain fell, plashing on the veined leaves of the hazels; a yellow-green wave of light descended the distant hills and followed the black shadow over cornfield, meadow, and webbed pattern of hop field, washing the red oast-houses with instant colour. The swift sunlight swept down to

the meadow, the shadow passed onwards, and again the sun gave its vitalising rays to the grass and the wild flowers.

The blackbird left the oak tree and dropped down to continue his search among the moist leaf-mould; the wren was silent. Just behind, and dividing the field from the pheasant wood, the brook, its waters swelling with light, brimmed smoothly round a curve. A sweet little whispering call, oft repeated and so gentle that it might have been the voice of the brook, came from the ashpoles beyond. A long-tailed tit was gathering the down from the hazel catkins, calling, or rather murmuring, in shy ecstatic love to her mate as she did so. The sunlight—rendered whiter and purer by the wind from the far hills—streamed down through the nut trees and the opening buds of ash; as the leaves rustled they caught the sunbeams, and were turned a lucent green. Mingling with the tender notes of my little bottle-bird gathering her

material was the voice of the brook, almost inaudible, but lifting the heart with sudden joy for its poem.

I watched the two birds, so happy with each other, and heedless of anything but the immediate joyful moment, carry the down to a quick-set hedge, snowy with blossom, dividing the meadow from the wheatfield. They disappeared for a moment among its greeneries and spiky thorns, and then flew back to the covert, still murmuring to each other in their wheezy, subdued tones. In the hedge the house was nearly completed, and had been fashioned with wondrous skill. Outside the birds had woven gray lichen from the apple trees with the green moss found under the oaks, and gradually a long, bottle-shaped nest had grown among the thorns. Several hundreds of feathers had been borne from the farmyard—distant over a mile—each journey made with the feeble jerky flight. Think of the infinite labour and searching

before the cradle is ready for the dozen minute eggs that will nestle in its soft cup! The little chap and his adoring wife were not alarmed at my presence: I stood within two yards of their nest, but they flew into the hedge and out again without fear or distress.

A wild bee hummed among the nettles, content and self-sufficient; a crow slanted overhead, veering as he saw me, for crows and gamekeepers hate each other equally; a dead leaf fluttered into the water and was carried in a foam-capped whirlpool under the roots of the hawthorn. Three willow-wrens came to the tree, and sought the insects that walked over the broad platform of the leaves; one flew to the surface of the brook and seized a horse-fly struggling in the water. The stream sang and sang, carrying the leaf that had left the tree for ever; the sunlight flashed a burnished ripple, was gone again, and the bees brushed against the nettles, wondering if they should

stay there or gather their harvest from the bluebells, lit by the shuffling shadow mazes, whose honey lay ready for loading. All the morning the bells on the green towers of stalk had been pealing their chimes of fragrance to the bees; the busy harvesters went heavily past, drawing their song-inspiration from the infinite flame of the sun, passing from bell to bell with an eagerness that must cause the wild hyacinths to rejoice—for would they not shortly vanish like the celandines and the wind-flowers? Nothing remains for long. A brief life, and they have gone whither all things that draw upon the earth-energy must go. Though the blackbird sing so leisurely, the flowers stand gently timorous in their fragility, the veined leaf stain itself with the sunbeams, and I am exalted in the "light and fire of summer," yet for all there is only so little of time. Therefore, it seemed to me, by the brimming water, so pitiable that millions were confined in

factory and office, breathing the air fouled by exhaust of petrol engine and chimney, while the brook rippled so sweetly, and the living air formed a passionate stream with the energy of the sunbeams.

Dreaming by the brook, I thought of other woods nearer London, which are so dear because of old association with the friend of my boyhood. There still the nightingale returns, the jay lurks, and the mysterious nightjar wheels when the chafer-beetles flit against the oak leaves at twilight. And yet, less than half a mile away, is a busy tram terminus. The wild things in freedom love their haunts and are not easily driven away, but in the higher wood—beautiful in spring with apple blossom, uncurling brakefern, silver birch and sheen of bluebell—no birds sang as alone I walked among its violated sanctities. It was the hour of solitude, when the sun almost was quenched and the moon had not yet come above the dim hills. The

paths were beaten into mire by the passing and re-passing of a thousand feet, acres of bluebells had been uprooted and taken away, many trampled and crushed, or gathered and cast carelessly on the paths. The apple blossom was stripped from the trees. In his instinctive effort to possess beauty, man invariably destroys it—for is not all beauty ever elusive? It is the subconscious, or deeper than subconscious, realisation of this elusiveness of beauty that causes the sadness of its contemplation—the blossoms were gone, a whole spring-life of them, carried away by the people who had come from Walworth, Shoreditch, and Woolwich. Branches of those graceful trees, the silver birches, had been torn and wrenched off; not content with decimating the flowers, grasping hands had broken the smaller trees. A week ago, before the fatal beauty of the apple bloom had drawn the hordes from their strongholds, I found dozens of thrushes' and black-

birds' nests—some with eggs, others with fledgelings—all these disappeared on that Sunday. No beauty remains inviolate for long.

I walked slowly to the tram terminus, where the crowded cars waited to bear the many people back to London, thinking that soon the woods would be down, and houses with their inevitable laurel and rhododendron bushes crowd together in regular patches; the sooner, perhaps, the better. Memory of former days was only too poignantly present.

In the cars sat the women and the men, each one clasping a flower or a fragment of blossom—of hawthorn, apple, or chestnut tree; the little children wriggled and chattered, holding in their arms great bunches of bluebells with their sappy stalks gleaming white where the sun had not stained them; boys with purple-dusty grass bennets and girls with lilac-coloured cuckoo flowers and drooping buttercups. A phantom

carillon still chimed from the wild hyacinths, though their towers were fallen and the belfries wrecked. I looked at the transfigured faces of the children—old or young, they were all children—who breathed in the smoke and worked in the shadow, and saw that the beauty of the wild flowers had passed into their eyes; although the woods were ravaged, the spoiling and pillaging had not been in vain. For two or three days wilting flowers and stolen blossom would remind them of the sunlight and the fresh air, of the cloudshadow that swept up and the warmth that followed when the beams of light lacquered the branches of the trees.

I was filled with an ecstasy; the car, ordinarily so drab with its burden of artisans and factory workers, seemed illumined and vitalised with yellow, the colour of happiness; a radiance hovered about the children, as though the buttercups had dislustred their gold upon the air. I wanted to shout my

joy aloud. Here was a manifestation of my hopes for mankind, the thoughts ever with me; at night when only the stars are in the sky, or when the moon is old and like a scarred shield nailed under the rafters of heaven; at dawn, when the light flows over the eastern bar of the world till it drains into the western sunset. One thought by night and one thought by day—my hope is for the happiness of mankind. Could words of mine but tell you of the dream that lurks by the brook in summer, or with the clouds floating with snowy sails in cerulean waters! There the Immortals are waiting. See the joy and happiness that is with every swallow flying low over a lake, his liquid image gliding under him. What is all the philosophy in the world to the joy of the beautiful swallow? Civilisations have risen and crumbled, faded into nothingness, like footprints in the desert obliterated by sand. The sweet little whispering call of my longtailed titmice

fashioning their bottle nest, so happy in the sunshine, is a wiser and more profound utterance than all the philosophy collected from the books of the world. . . .

The tram drew nearer London with its ragged children; had I doubted it before, no longer was the ideal of the artist obscured from me—you must hear it. It must be the ideal of man to beautify the lives of those who pass nearly all their days in the places whence the wild birds and the flowers have gone for evermore.

I thought of these things as the voice of the brook mingled with the love-whisper of my little bottle-birds, and the bees droned their anthem to the pealing chimes of the bluebells. For every year the flowers come, the migrants travel across the great dim sea, the wheat sways and bends as the wind rushes over, and the silver-burning sun swings across the sky; but never enough of these do the little ones in the city see; life does not remain for

long. And I saw the children of the trams reflected in the light-burthened brook, and was glad, even though the buttercups had gone from the meadow, and the wandering bees sought in vain in those other woods for the loveliness of the stained apple-blossom.

# MEADOW GRASSES

*(To B. E. H. T.)*

*i*

A BRIMSTONE butterfly drifted with the wind over the waving grasses, and settled on the shallow cup of a tall flower, John-go-to-bed-at-noon. The bright flowers were closing, for the sun was high. It paused for an instant only, and then fluttered over the hedge and was gone. Came a common white butterfly—a weed of the air, hated by the countrymen: yet part of summer's heart as it flickered like a strayed snowflake in the sunshine, passing the whorled spires of red-green sorrel and glazed petals of buttercup, living its brief hour among the scents and colours of summer. Vibrating their sun-crisped wings with shrill hum, the hover-flies shot past: the wild

humble bees sang to themselves as in a frenzy of labour for their ideal they took the pollen from the roses in the hedge; the cuckoos sent call after call of melody from the distant hazel coppice. The sound of summer was everywhere, the earth filled with swelling ecstasy—everything so green and alive, the waving grasses and the hawthorns; the green kingdom charged and surcharged with energy, from the wild strawberry to the mighty, sap-surfeited bole of the oak. Although so still, the vast earth was humming and vibrating, the crescendo of passion reached gradually while the sun swept nearer, day by day, the zenith of its curve.

In one corner of the meadow was a small pond, half hidden by rushes, bearing a golden blazon of flower—in autumn the countrypeople would grind the roasted seeds of the iris to make their "poor man's coffee." With them grew the bog asphodel, crowned by a tapering spike of starlike

flowers, also yellow, the colour of happiness: in old time this plant was supposed to soften the bones of cattle, hence the Latin name, *ossifragum*. Hidden securely among the rushes, the moor-hen had her nest of dried water-weed, a platform on which at night rested her children, little black balls of fluff with a red beak. A faint chirruping came from the flags, a splash, and silence: the mother had heard my slow approach and called to her young to remain still. Something with a thin, stick-like body, enamelled blue and fanned by a whirling crystal of light, alighted on the open white petals of a crowsfoot—the water-buttercup; the dragonfly folded its gauzy wings and contemplated the still deeps from which, a few hours before, it had crept—a summer thing that would fulfil its destiny so quickly, and die. Like the civilised bees that leave the security of skep and stored caves of honey to the new race, so all the wild things live but to secure the future of their species. Everything

strives for the beautiful, the ideal, without conscious effort, maybe, but the ideal is there—all for the species. The nightingale that silvers the dusk with song has finer notes than his ancestor of olden time; he has learnt so much during the centuries; through generations of faithful loyalty to an ideal his tiny soul-flame has become brighter, and his voice speaks with sweeter poetry. On the may trees in the hedge, already shaking their blossoms into the wind, the wild roses were open to the sky; it was now their brief hour of sunshine. Simple petals stained with roseal hue, they waited for the wild bee to bring the pollen that would change the beauty into life.

High sang the larks over the meadow, striving with fluttering wings to reach the blue vision of heaven. Their voices trailed to the earth and filled the heart with hope and joy. Afar, the noisy rooks fed their young in the colony in the elm tops; at

hand, on the ground, golden buttercup and white moon-daisy, lemon-coloured hawk-weed and obstinate charlock, beloved of the visiting bee for its great dowry of honey. The sunbeams had flooded the cold earth during the springtide of the year, and now the earth had sent its flowers and its grasses with their faces turned above, whence came the light that was life, the light that was truth to the birds and the bees, the flowers and the grasses. For years I pondered the higher meaning of life, studying in a city, amid the smoke and clattering hum of traffic; the wild ones have never needed to seek—they have been happy by the brook with its lanced sun-points and swallowy song of summer over the pebbles and the mossy boulders; they have had no illusions. Nor have they needed philosophies or discarnate paradises.

Everything loved the mowing meadow. By the stream the blackbirds sought for

food, the finches came to sip, the hover-flies fanned above the kingcups. Scarlet soldier flies and little plain moths clung to bennet-bloom and spray-like awn, the wind sighed in the grasses as it shook the dust-pollen from the heads. The meadow grasses were timorous of the breeze, and trembled at its coming, like the heart of a maiden reluctant yet yearning: whispering to the wind to bear the seeds, for the mowers would come shortly. Over the water-meadow the lapwings wheeled and spun—the lapwing holds the secret of the swamps and boglands, and you hear it in his wild voice as his wings sough above. In the early spring he makes over the dull furrows his plaintive music, climbing high and diving to the ground as though it were sweet ecstasy to fall, wing-crumpled and broken-hearted, before his mate. Something in the call of the peewit fills me with sadness, like the memory of those passed springs that were in boyhood so glamorous.

The peewit's song is wild, he knows that all things pass, that the leaves and the flowers will die and nothing remain.

Now, as he saw me, his voice was harsher, more husky; somewhere among the tufts of spiked grass his young were crouching, depending on their plumage in harmony with the ground to remain unseen. *See-oo-sweet, see-oo-sweet, woo*, cried the mother: her curled crest was visible against the sky as she turned on broad pinions.

*ii*

One morning, when the cuckoo was silent and the young partridges were following their parents through the culms of the meadow-forest, two labourers arrived with the mowing machine, drawn by a pair of chestnut horses. The overture to the midsummer hum was beginning to be heard in the fields: wild and tame bees ceased not from their labours; the wolf

spiders were everywhere in the long grass, searching for fly or insect in their blood lust. Another kind of spider had erected a net-like web between the stalks, with a round silky tunnel in the middle, in which he crouched among the skins of beetles, glowing a dull bronzy green in the sun; the torn wings of a red admiral butterfly never again to pass with colour-dusty sails above the blue scabious flowers; all the tragic remainder of his catch scattered like jetsam at the sea's marge. The larks still sang into the sunshine. It was the time of year, just past the fullness of young summer, when the song of visitant birds was over and the insect hum had begun its shimmering undertone.

The mowing machine, drawn by the glossy-coated horses, moved down one side of the field. One of the mowers sat on the iron seat and drove the pair; his mate walked alongside and scooped the cut grasses from the knives with a rake. The

horses tossed their manes and swished their tails, drawing along with magnificent power the light machine, and leaving behind a swathe of broken grasses and coloured flowers whose fragrance and hue availed no longer—in an instant the life was gone —whither? Rhythmically they moved in straight line, the clattering of the machine mingling with the cries of the driver: like a sea-green wave overcurled and spent in foam the flowery grasses lay in the sun. Cat's-tail grass, foxtail grass, meadow soft grass, pale red in tint and sometimes called Yorkshire fog; couch grass—the *agropyron* of ancient Greece—the wild kin of the wheat; the sweet-smelling Vernal grass without whose presence one of the fleeting scents of summer were denied us. Steadily the mowing machine was drawn round the field, fresh wallow lay where but a moment before the meadow-forest bowed and returned to the wind, and the dandelion wrought its goldened disk in the image of the sun.

With the lilac flower of the scabious lay the incarnadine head of the poppy—tokening sleep that now had claimed its own. Meadow crane's-bill, which had over-topped the grasses with the wine-dark sorrel and prickly thistle, the vetch, and the blue speedwell—from the highest to the lowest—all brought low by the skirring knives.

Years ago in an old village the mowers went down into the meadow with their curved scythes, and throughout the long summer day they swung their ancient implements. Every now and then they paused to whet the sap-blurred blades with a stone carried in their belts. *Tu-whet, tu-whaat*—holding the symbol of olden times near the point: it was the extreme edge of the curve that required such constant sharpening. Their hats were bleached by the showers and the sunshine—I do not recollect seeing a new one—but it may have been a faulty impression of childhood. It was thirsty work wielding the scythe

on its long handle, and required much skill to prevent the point from digging into the ground. Great wooden "bottles," or firkins, of ale were brought out in the early morning and hidden in the nettle ditch, well down in the cool and shade; and often a gallon of small ale was drunken by each labourer before the Goatsbeard closed its flowers at noon.

The sun bronzed their arms and dried the wallows; colour soon faded. The scarlet poppy shrivelled to a purple brown, the gold of the dandelion became dulled, the grasses wilted as they fell. It was great fun to follow the workers, to gather whole armfuls of flowers, and to pull their petals apart. They were but flowers to me then, pretty things, their colours delighting the eye, so many of them: the boy was natural and thought little, knowing nothing of life. I have not been there for years, but even now, when so many stacks have grown and dwindled near the barn, I am

wandering in those fields. No other meadows can be the same, the flowers there were fairer, the sunlight brighter as it followed the clouds. With so many summers burnt out in autumnal fires there is a dearer thought for every flower of blue chicory: and each germander speedwell, so common in the hedgerow, has in its little petals something of the mystery of the sky. The breath of all the springtimes, the light and shade of summery months, the colour and song of the fields stored, layer upon layer, in the boy's mind, return a hundredfold, and with them a desire, never ceasing, for others to share in this secret of happiness—the thoughts given by nature.

In the evening the village girls came into the field to turn the hay when the grass was fully dried by the sun, and nothing remained of luscious clover or disk of corn feverfew. The young larks or corncrakes, caught perchance by the rasping sweep of scythe, had been dead

many days. They raked the harvest of the meadow into mound-like wakes, while the master haymaker, ever watching the clouds and the wind, urged them to greater endeavour, for rain meant instant loss. We tossed wisps of hay at one another, and formed ourselves into rival parties, each with its castle, and defied our enemies with shrill cries. The lumbering wain came back from the stack, a host of flies pestering the horse, who stamped and kicked in vain when a gadfly fastened to his side and drew his blood. If the weather were fine, and no danger of rain impending, the carter would, as a great treat, let us ride on the broad back of the horse, who appreciated the fan of wych-elm twigs that was whisked about his ears and eyes.

They were happy days—gone now with the wielders of the scythes in their faded hats and their wooden ale-bottles. Now the knives of the mowing machine shear the field in half a day; the happy girls no

longer turn the swathes in the evening. The old spirit of the country is dying, and the factory and town calls to its children —there is more life there, and more money to be made. The "big house" is sold, and a new squire has arrived, once a merchant and now a rich man; the sons of the old squire lie somewhere in the deep sea near Jutland, so why retain the estate, heavily taxed and scarce self-supporting, when it will eventually pass away into other hands?

I have come to know other meadows now, but they can never be quite the same. I lie in the flowery fields, seeing the quaking-grass against the sky, and a wild bee swinging on a blue columbine, while a lark rains joy from on high. These return, these are eternal; and with them a voice that is silent, a colour that is faded.

# TIGER'S TEETH

*(To J. S. of Croyde)*

THE story of the Tiger's great climb is still told in the village, although it happened a dozen or more years ago.

The headland runs out into the Atlantic for nearly two miles, and is a mile wide across its base. They grow oats there, for the ground is starved. Some of it, indeed, is so poor that the plough never furrows it, and only sheep stray upon the sward. Gorse grows plentifully, hiding many rabbits' holes, and in summer near the cliff-edge at the Point the curled cast feathers of the gulls tremble in the wind.

At the Point the cliff drops almost sheer to the rocks three hundred and ten feet below, forming an indentation in the headland known as the Hole. Gulls dwell in colonies upon the ledges and in the crannies,

and like drifting snowflakes a swirl of birds floats on the air, uprising from the sea and uttering gabbling cries of alarm when an intruder passes near the lip of the Hole.

The village historian told me the story one rainy night in the Nightcrow Inn. He was a great friend of mine, and universally known as "Muggy"; he had been in most places on the earth, returning eventually to his remembered village, happy in the open air with his simple livelihood. The returned wanderer did all kinds of jobs in the hamlets round about, gathered and sold watercress and mushrooms in their seasons, arranged for the purchase of patent manures by the farmers, representing many firms, and was also—"I be nothing if I be not up to date, zur, do ee see?"—an agent for fire insurance in the big town eight miles away. For generations his family had lived in the village; his grandfather had bought the wreckage of *H.M.S. Weasel*, that went on the rocks of the Hole over a century

ago, all but one man being drowned. He had the newspaper cuttings of the wreck, and sure enough, his ancestor was mentioned. He cherished that cutting.

One night we had finished our game of whist with the frayed cards, and were talking. The Inn has a low ceiling of black oak beams, roughly shaped, and is lit by a paraffin lamp having a permanent black fringe to its orange flame. In a momentary silence we heard the sharp patter of rain flung against the window by a rapidly rising wind.

"It would be dangerous at the Point to-night," I murmured, shivering.

Amid a chorus of assent my friend Muggy remembered the epic story of the climb of Raven Rock. Had I heard tell of it? No, I hadn't, and I settled my elbows more comfortably on the oak table, and prepared for the yarn. More beer first, of course. Muggy would not have any; he drank but a pint every night, he said.

The pots were brought back, foaming with home-brew, the landlord adjusted the milled screw of the lamp so that less dark soot-shadows slipped against the white-washed guard above, and we listened in silence while the wind drove hard against the western face of the house, bringing the rain-clouds straight from over the wild wastes of the Atlantic.

They had tried to get the robbers in many ways, but rarely were they seen. Evidence of their visitations was much against them. Dead lambs had been found in their pens—little gray bundles lying still while their mothers bleated above them. One morning Voley, the shepherd, came to the yeaning field and found that a ewe itself had been attacked, and had lost an eye. After that he carried the great ten-bore flighting gun that was usually brought out in the frosty winter when wildfowl haunted the great lonely wastes by the

estuary formed of the confluence of two rivers. The robbers were too cunning, however, perceived him from invisibility, and never came near.

Muggy had a job at the time trapping rabbits for the bailiff of a gentleman's farm. He was paid by results, being given so much a head for perfect rabbits; and rabbits did not pass as perfect to the dealer at the market town when half their heads had been battered as though by the blows of some mighty instrument. The curious thing was that he did not know for a long while what caused the damage. He thought of a fox, but a fox would not have mauled rabbits like that; he would have carried them away. The idea of a badger being the aggressor came to him, but he could find no spoor of a badger's pad, which, once seen, is never forgotten. And still the mysterious depredations went on. Farmer Smith of Crowberry, later on in the year, lost seven chicks one morning,

with no sign of how they had gone. He thought of hawks, and waited all that afternoon with a gun, but nothing came. He knew that had it been a kestrel the bird would have returned for more. Another morning he lost seventeen. Nine of them had been left—mutilated lumps of stained feathers. They looked as though a spike had been driven through their bodies. He knew that it was no ordinary thing that caused the destruction.

Mortality among the lambs continued. And then, one night in the Nightcrow Inn, light came to them. They slapped their thighs, and rattled their pint mugs; of course, it could only be "thay" ravens! Till closing time that night it was the only subject talked about.

The Tiger was there and his brother Aaron—two men who belonged to a family that has been famous for cliff scaling in the district for many generations. They had immense arms, being blacksmiths.

The following day a boat pulled round the headland, and the stronghold of the robbers was detected, though no sign of them could be seen. Aaron was in the boat, and he fixed the place by a peculiar formation of the edge of the cliff. This done, he grunted, and a long pull back to the sands began.

The waning moon of dawn had floated above the Exmoor hills when the next morning three men left the village and set off along the road to the base of the headland. They carried ropes, hauling blocks, a great crowbar, and a sledge-hammer. John Smith of Crowberry was one, and his companions were the blacksmith brothers.

They were going to rob the robbers.

Now ravens are rare birds, having been persecuted during the centuries almost to extinction. The reasons for that persecution are easily understandable. There was no compensation for the dead lambs, no money paid out for the slaughtered chicks,

and many farmers, especially in the remote districts, found it hard enough to live, without being preyed upon by ravens. Still, the ravens were now heavily protected by law; in the village it was reckoned that any one who took their eggs or shot the parent birds would be imprisoned for at least a month. By reason of their rarity, a certain visiting bird-fancier from the town had mentioned that he would give ten shillings a bird for any fledgelings brought to him. It was a grand price, they agreed at the Nightcrow Inn; not knowing, of course, that the dealer would make a huge and assured profit by sending them to London.

Along one of the sheep-wrought paths, among the springing brake ferns and blackthorns, sea-bleached holly-bushes and gorse clusters, just beginning to respond to the sunbeams, the three men went that spring morning. Already the larks were singing high in an azure sky, the kestrels hanging

in the light wind, the buzzard wheeling in lone circles far above them. They did not pause to watch, however, for there was a dangerous job on hand, and it was three miles to the Point.

The three hunters kept a sharp look-out for the ravens, but saw nothing, even when they neared the lip of the Hole.

Aaron dropped his bar, the tackle was flung on the sward, and coats were stripped off. Work began in earnest. The first few powerful twangs of the sledge-hammer on the bar woke echoes in the Hole, and a thousand gulls spread pearly wings tipped with jet and slipped into the air. An uproar of hoarse voices came upwards, and, mounting high, a great seabird, spanning near six feet, dived at them with a soughing of vast wings and passed a bare two feet over their heads. But the men took no notice. Time was precious, and they feared that the policeman might discover them; the terrifying thought of prison

was ever behind the thought of golden sovereigns in their pockets. Deep into the sward Aaron drove the bar, until it remained rigid, leaning backwards from the line of the cliff-face. Under his arms Tiger passed the hempen rope and the thinner guide-rope, while John Smith of Crowberry adjusted the hauling blocks.

"Thaat be aa-right, reckons."

"Aiy aiy!"

Aaron and John Smith of Crowberry took a strain on the rope and began to pay out hand over hand. The Tiger leaned outwards over the Hole and slowly disappeared over the edge.

Two tugs on the guide-rope, and the men remained still. Next came three tugs, and Aaron whispered to Farmer John that Tiger was near the ledge. They held on tight.

Meanwhile Tiger was spinning slowly on the rope. He started to swing, backwards and forwards, aiming for the ledge whereon was the mass of twigs and sticks

comprising the ravens' nest. He was about two hundred feet above the rocks, and looking down he noticed how the waves slid smoothly over them, churning and boiling white with foam afterwards. Sometimes a gull passed near him, showing its yellow beak with the reddish blotch at the end. Now he was swinging nearer the ledge—in and out, in and out. Once or twice he looked upwards and wondered what he should do if the old ravens came for him. He had no stick, and their beaks could easily pierce a lamb's skull. But not so much as a croak was to be heard. He decided—as he heaved to and fro—that with his share of the money he would buy a purse-net for shore-fishing. Nearer and nearer he swung to the nest, and at last he could touch it with his foot. But the time was not yet, so he pushed hard away with his feet, and a loose fragment of stone, dislodged from above, hissed past him, and grew smaller as it dropped towards the

sea. Once more he pushed away from the ledge, which was about two feet wide, swung towards it, grasped a projecting stone, clung hard with his left hand, and gave one tug on the guide rope. Up above they lowered him one foot, and he clambered to the ledge, panting.

In the centre of the cradle of sticks, a yard across, gaped three fledgeling ravens. At sight of Tiger they opened their big black beaks in fear and croaked dolefully. He put his hand over and one pecked at it; he struck it a sharp blow and it croaked the more, deep, rasping, and hoarse.

Tiger knew he would have to hurry. He seized one of the three birds by the leg and dragged it from the fouled nest, to which it clung gawkily. But at last it was free, its legs tied with the twine already looped to his belt, and thrust into his basket. Quickly he seized the other two and tied them, noticing while he did so that pieces of dead gulls, rabbits, chickens, lamb's wool, fish,

frogs, and broken ducks' eggs lay about on the twigs. At last he had secured them, and left the ledge. The old birds, if they were near, made no sign. For a while Tiger swung idly, satisfied, looking lazily at the tide below. A few stones hurtled down, and one hit his wrist, numbing it; the fledgelings kicked and struggled, squawking. Three minutes, and his swinging was much lessened; he gave five tugs for the hauling signal.

There was no response, for just before John Smith and Aaron had realised with fear that the crowbar had worked loose in the sward. Unthinkingly they had relaxed the strain, and the loose stratum had yielded.

The Tiger tugged away, but there was no answering lift. Five times he tugged, slowly. He hung still over the rocks, whence the tide was now ebbing, leaving them gaunt and gray.

Up above the two men held tight. They dared not move, for fear of the bar coming

right out of the ground. If there had been one more man it would have been possible to haul Tiger up, bit by bit. As it was, they could only remain still. The weight on the rope was heavy, but they could stop so for hours if need be; till help came, at any rate.

Presently Tiger realised what had happened, and grunted in disgust. He started to climb, using his arms only, for he was frightened lest he should hurt the birds and so lessen their value. Dimly he realised that if he tired and dropped, the rope would jerk the other two over the cliff-edge, and all three, with the birds, would crash to their death. He climbed twenty feet, feeling no fatigue. There was another hundred feet to go, easy work, before the cliff bulged slightly. Slabs of dislodged rock hurtled past him, and one cut his brow. The blood poured into his eye, and he spat angrily.

When the first ache came to his damaged

wrist he wound the rope round his right leg and stood upon it. He cared no longer about the birds. But he knew that to rest thus was no rest at all, so upwards he went again—a terrible laboured climbing, slowly and with a strained wrist, blood running from broken knuckles, and the sweat pouring from his body. He began to feel the weight of the dragging loop of rope below him, but still he struggled upwards. A shower of dust spat into his face, and he wondered if he were blinded. His arms shook, his muscles burned, and his palms, in spite of their coating of horn, were beginning to tear. He could hardly see for the blood and sweat in his eyes, and as he breathed he snored heavily, with great shuddering gasps.

The jutting-out cliff was just above him now. Here the rope lay flat and taut against the loose rubble, but he dug each hand alternately into the shale and literally dragged himself up, fist over fist. Then it

was possible to press his toes into the slight slope, and rest.

For a minute he lay thus, in agony. But he knew that to rest much was fatal; reaction would set in. He wound his left leg round the rope, seized the guide-rope (which ran through another loose belt) and patiently pulled its lower end through so that there should be no slack between him and the two men above. After an eternity of patient hauling the line lay straight between him and the lip of the Hole. Then he wound it twice round his thick neck, and bit on it firmly with his teeth. This done, he gave five tugs on it, and saw it tighten. Crushing his jaws together, he took the mighty strain, and was drawn up a foot. Arching his back, and leaning out nearly at right angles to the face of the cliff, he put one foot above the other. All the weight of his ascent was borne by his teeth; they were his last hope. Tiger's teeth were yellow like old ivory, and the best in the village. Many a time he had

taken a hundredweight sack in them and moved about with it; many a time he had swung from a beam by them, holding a rope in his jaws. Now they were to save his life. Both the haulers and himself were well-nigh exhausted when his beard covered with blood-stained froth appeared over the lip of the cliff, and they dragged him sobbing and cursing on the matted grass.

Ten minutes later they had coiled up their ropes, taken up the bar, and were walking quickly to the village. The three ravens were alive and well, quite unhurt by Tiger's struggles. The men spoke seldom as they walked; their fear was that the policeman would see them.

They reached Tiger's cottage in safety and closed the door behind them. His wife had a two-gallon jar of small ale for them, and Tiger drank a gallon, only pausing to fill his basin. Then he licked his moustache, and sat down on a chair. The other two men had thrown the tackle on the

table, and were taking deep draughts of the beer. They had finished the two gallons when a succession of heavy blows came on the door; these ceased, and there was a great thudding on the roof.

At first they thought it was the policeman. Rural folk are usually terrified at the idea of the law; they have the simple imagination of children.

"Come in, zur," quavered Mrs. Tiger.

Aaron, who was a devout chapel-goer, began to tremble.

"It be a ghostie!" he whispered.

"Git out!" scoffed Mrs. Tiger, for she had seen two large black shapes that she recognised pass across the little window.

Sure enough, the old ravens had discovered their young. The curious thing, Muggy emphasised, was that there had been no sign of them either during Tiger's climb or afterwards, while the three men were tramping the three miles to his cottage, nor had they heard any croaking.

Meanwhile, the people in the cottage were fearful that the policeman would come their way and discover everything. The old birds kept banging away at the thatch, tearing out great mouthfuls of it in an endeavour to get at the fledgelings. Tiger did not dare to use his gun; the situation frightened him; so he opened the door. Immediately the cat pounced at a young bird, but one of the old birds swooped down and gave the cat a tap on the head that sent it spinning away, to drop dead with a hole in its skull that Tiger could put two fingers in. The youngsters, with nobody to stop them, got right away, half flying and half hopping.

"And since that day, zur," Muggy said solemnly, "no raven has been known to touch a lamb. That's as true as I'm sitting here."

The ravens have nested on the headland again this year, using their old breeding ledge; and I am glad that at least one pair

of these rare birds haunts the solitudes by the sea. No one interferes with them, except the peregrines, but the raven is too much for that fierce swift raider, turning on his back in mid-air and holding his beak upwards like a javelin as the falcon is about to strike. A quick eye the raven needs, for the hawk plunges at about two hundred miles an hour. But they never harm one another, and I know for a fact, having seen it myself, that the ravens practise their turning movement. They love to float in an uprushing wind just below the cliff edge, and roll over like a twirled distaff, sideways, and then back again. And I think that if any stranger tried to shoot one, the Nightcrow Inn would rise in anger against him. The ravens have earned their sanctuary.

# THE OUTLAW:

*Being the indisputable (journalese) truth about the peregrine falcon that came to St. Paul's Cathedral in* 1920.

THE beechwood was ten miles from London. One morning in late September a strange visitor came to it, and perched upon a low branch. A blackbird, feeding below among the dried moss and brown leaves, shrilled a sudden alarm. The blackbird had never seen such an apparition before, but he recognised the family.

The newcomer remained still. He was tired and exhausted after a long journey. Since dawn he had flown high up, his pinions urged on and on by a fierce despair. For his mate had been shot upon Lundy Island, and he had flown straight into the sun's face as though to find her spirit taken back into its flame that gave all the wild ones life. Swift had he flown, never pausing

till he came to the beechwood; seeing it below, and wrapping his wings around him, he had fallen like a great iron arrow-head into its solitude.

The pigeons who roosted were in the stubble: the starlings haunted the water-meadows: the jackdaws flocked with the rooks about the furrows. The beechwood was still, for the blackbird had slipped away.

The stranger flapped his long thin wings, and looked around him.

He was about eighteen inches long, and bluish-ash in colour. His throat and upper breast were white, tinged with yellow, and marked with a few dark streaks. But the most noticeable thing was the eyes. They were large, and keen, dusky; ringed with yellow eyelids. Fierce and remorseless was their expression, aided by the short, hooked bill.

The falcon suddenly stiffened. From the lake below the sloping forest had come a

faint trumpet-like call. He knew the call well, for many times had he and his mate preyed upon the wild duck in the Devon estuary opposite Lundy Island.

The next moment he had gone through the trees, a swift shadow. A little vole splitting a beechmast on the ground below crouched in terror. For everything preyed upon its kind. The weasel came by day, and in summer the grass snake; if it left the wood and went to the meadow there was the poised kestrel hawk; in the furrows a fox sometimes ran, snapping at the tiny mice; in the dark night came the great wood owl, and that white devil, the barn owl.

The mouse crouched in terror, but he passed on, a swift shadow: he was a noble bird, and did not take rodents.

Seven duck had flighted, and were going towards the reaches of the Thames. They flew fast and steadily, at fifty miles an hour. The passing narrow shadow became

a relentless and swift whirling speck above them, ever climbing.

Then one of the duck was falling, the flight was scattered; the falling one clutched and borne to the beechwood, where the hooked beak tore and ripped.

Thenceforward the wood became a place of terror. One morning the keeper discovered a cock pheasant lying dead on the leaves. A small part of its breast had been eaten. At first he thought that it was the work of a fox—but he was puzzled; he knew that the fox usually ate more of a longtail than a small part of its breast, and always buried his half-eaten victim for consumption on another occasion. And on turning it over, he was still more puzzled. The back was ripped as though a knife had slashed and turned the skin right back.

A hundred yards away he found a carrion crow. The back of the crow was also smashed, although no attempt had been made to eat any section of its body. In other

parts of the wood the keeper found slain pheasants, all badly broken; the remains of a squirrel—one forepaw and a bushy tail comprising the remains. Three dead duck floated in the lake. Whatever new and ghastly thing was causing the havoc, he told his head man later, it seemed to delight in destroying and killing for sport.

Gradually the terror became the topic of talk in the inns roundabout Bromley, in Kent. Some of the bolder and more imaginative declared that it was caused by an Arctic owl—one even said that he had seen it stooping at a dog in the twilight. He was a well-known liar.

No one in the district—which was outlying to a large town just outside the suburban area of south-east London—had ever heard of the like.

The mystery was solved in a sudden manner. The keeper had been setting baited traps—of the "gin" variety—tempting the unknown with the entrails

of rabbits. But he caught nothing save a mangy stoat, blind in one eye and the other filming over with age. The gins were of no avail.

The keeper kept fowls in his garden. One day he was sitting in the porch of his cottage, smoking after the midday meal, and ruminating on what the squire had said about giving up the rearing of pheasants. His fowls were strutting and scratching: one had recently produced an egg and was proclaiming the fact with unmelodious insistency.

There came a hissing as of something falling: an alarmed curse from a hen. The keeper jumped up, swearing at the bluish tumbling of narrow wings that had gone over the hedge.

One of his fowls was kicking the air spasmodically. There was blood on the path. He picked the hen up—it was headless.

The keeper swore; he knew what had

caused the mischief among his longtails and duck. It was a big hawk—of a kind never seen before. So swiftly had it come that the fowl was decapitated by those dagger spikes on the hind claw of the raider's feet.

One day a journalist was walking in a meadow. The meadow was near to a copse containing a dozen tall elm trees. In the elms were nearly a hundred black patches —a colony of rooks at their old nests. The rookery had been deserted in June, when old and young birds took to the fields and made local migrations.

That morning a mist had lain in the meadow and the rooks had known that it was time to return to the colony.

As the journalist, happy in the October sunshine, passed near the rookery, he was surprised to see the whole flock—some hundreds of birds—rise with harsh imperative cries into the air. The beating of

many jet wings caused a vast soughing, and the leaves below the trees rose and flitter-fluttered with the winnowing. As suddenly as it had begun, the outcry ceased. Yet still the birds climbed higher.

Soon they were just specks against the blue, wheeling like a ring of smoke in one great circle. Then the agitated cries came again. One segment of the circle broke into falling and diving, zooming and slipping, birds, as though a strong wind had scattered them every way.

The journalist was mystified. He sat down to watch, and to discover the reason.

Two of the rooks had left the circle, and were diving to earth. As they came nearer he saw that their wings hung limp. They fell a hundred yards away, and he ran over to them. They were dead.

Picking one up, it was warm, the sunlight gleaming on the hues of its wings, glinting green and purple. Their backs were bare of feathers, and gaping with a terrible wound.

He was more mystified, then thought that for some inexplicable reason the other rooks had pecked them to death. But why? He was more puzzled as he thought. He was well known for his puzzles.

Looking up, he saw that the circle had swung higher than ever. Gradually it drifted away, silent.

The journalist, who had some knowledge of natural history and ornithology, returned to London the next day and wrote the incident up as a "news story." But he could give no explanation. The editor was sceptical; said that it was no good. He laughed, and mentioning that it was "punk," promptly "spiked" it.

Meanwhile something was about to happen in London.

It was half-past five on Saturday afternoon. The journalist, who worked with a newspaper that went to press on Saturday night for publication on Sunday, was passing St. Paul's Cathedral. He stopped to look

at the pigeons strutting and searching for crumbs upon the worn paving stones. He found two months continuous work to be most exhausting. He still was puzzled about the dead rooks. He had been to every paper in London with his "rook story," but no one would print it. He even got laughed at as a "fake merchant"—a tribute to imagination, but damning as a reputation.

Like chaff before a blast of wind the pigeons scattered. His paper was rumpled by the agitated draught caused by their departure.

Looking up to the dome he saw a flock of about fifty pigeons wheeling in steady flight near the cross at the top. A speck fell with a suddenness that reminded him of a shot aeroplane: like a plunging halbert-head it was; there was a puff of feathers dancing and fluttering—the flock scattered, dived to earth, anywhere, anyhow, and the dark halbert-head became outlined against the sky, perched on the gilt cross that glistened in the afternoon sun.

Then he knew that it was a peregrine falcon, and thrilling with the sight, took a taxi-cab back to Fleet Street (he was young and keen) and "wrote the story up."

His editor "liked" the idea, but demanded that it should be rendered in what the journalist thought was the most illiterate English. The journalist and the editor sneered at each other about prose for some time: and the editor won. The illiterate account was penned, mauled over by a sub-editor, and finally displayed prominently on the front page of his paper. But the editor only leered when the journalist asked for his taxi-cab fare.

The falcon, leaving the woods near London came once more. The woods were ten miles from St. Paul's, and it took him eight minutes to fly to the dome.

His end was an epic one, and becomes such a noble spirit. From what the journalist

dreamed, he was able to imagine the death, and here it is.

One morning by the lake side stood a gray stump, a tall thing on two stalk-like legs. The gray stump remained motionless, as though watching his own dull image in the water.

It was a heron fishing.

He remained still for many minutes. Something passed in the water, a long neck shot forward, and a gleaming fish, pierced by the beak, drawn from the lake. The heron, who had paid a visit every morning from the heronry at Tonbridge, flew away; a slow-flapping, unwieldy thing, over a yard in length. His feet stretched out behind him, his head was tucked in between his shoulders.

The falcon was about. He stooped at the heron. Perhaps the spirit of ancestors, who left the gauntletted wrists of falconers to fly at the heron of olden times, was about him: for how else should he have dared

that pointed beak? Rolling like a ship in a gale, heavily and in distress, the heron turned on his back, and held his beak pointed at the stooping falcon.

The hawk swerved; swept up again; regained height, wrapped his wings about him and plunged. Again the beak met him, once more he swerved.

So the combat went on. Nearer the keeper's cottage they drifted. Now the heron was calling in distress, *Kaa-ack, kaa-ack.* Fell the halbert-head, darted the spear-beak, slipped the halbert-head. It was to be a fight to the death, till one should misjudge by the minutest error of time, the plundering heron or the outlawed falcon. The small birds hid themselves in the bushes —the sound of a shot rang out, the heron tumbled in alarm, recovered, flapped away; an eddy of gray feathers swirled in the wind, the echo of the report shivered back from the woods—and the falcon fell on the grass, its beak gaping, and panting for breath.

The keeper picked up the wild one, never more to swoop on "longtail" or "bird," never more to descend upon terrorised tame pigeon in Barnstaple or the great Dome of London. The proud eyes misted, the noble head fell back—the keeper was surprised to feel how light the bird was; and while he was weighing it in his hand the outlaw died.

. . . . . .

But perhaps the most extraordinary thing about this falcon-raid was that nearly every journalist in London saw the bird; but I saw it first, therefore it is mine.

## PEREGRINES IN LOVE

*(To E. G. S.)*

In the salt winds of the Atlantic, and above their ancient eyrie, the peregrine falcons anchor their flight with easy mastery of the gusty uptrends of the precipitous headland face. When first the celandine came below the hedges, the male hawk mounted high, and stooped at his larger mate like a black and shaftless arrowhead of iron, uttering shrill love-notes the while. Now the dog violets and the red campion flowers are among the grasses; the pink sea-thrift blooms in sheltered places; and still the peregrines pursue each other and kiss with swift fondness over the foamed waters.

The kestrel is considered by some naturalists to be the most scientific hoverer of our British hawks. Certainly he uses with great skill the winds of heaven for his livelihood.

He leans upon the moving air, sometimes slipping sideways and losing height, but reassuming poise by quick beats of his chestnut pinions. Our largest hawk, the buzzard, is common in this district by the sea, and with large wings outspread he sails circlewise till his prey is detected, when a slow descent is made to the ground. Often these birds have been observed to hang low over the heather and gorse, motionless, wings arched and bent backwards, for nearly a minute at a time. But the peregrines, so swift and ruthless in flight and habit, out-hover both the kestrel and the buzzard. The hovering of the kestrel is weak, delicately balanced; that of the buzzard clumsily weighty, and only managed in a strong air-current; the peregrine falcon cuts into the gusts, controlling his flight with instant power, unheeding the wind's vagaries. He can remain still, soar higher, or drift sideways with ease.

The eyrie is a hundred feet down the cliff-face, upon a narrow ledge. For years their young have been taken by the Tiger, a small, wiry man who, descends by a rope attached to a driven crowbar, swings inwards to the ledge, and is hauled to the top with the young falcons in a basket. Yet every year when the celandines come the falcons' courtship begins, ending only when the scent of the wild thyme fades and the sea-thrift rusts with autumn's decay. They hunt together, ranging afar. Their stoop is terrible to behold, so swift and shattering its ending. It may be at a rabbit which ventures forth from the holes of the swarded slopes, at a stock-dove beating speedy flight from Lundy Island, or at an immigrant swallow flying from alien wastes to the shore and sanctuary. Nothing is immune from ravage save the larger gulls and the sombre ravens, who croak defiance from their aerial soughing.

The peregrines raid from their base upon

the headland to the inland villages, watching for the chance of taking a tame dove from a cot; onwards to the lonely wastes of the sandhills, crowned with spike-grass, where the peewits wail throughout the springtime. They dash up the wide estuary; the ring-plover crouch low among the stones and seaweed as they pass; they even visit Barnstaple itself for the blue-gray pigeons that wheel above its old shipyards. In the skyey loftiness one moment are the hawks, watching and soaring, the male usually the higher; one will close pinions and dive like a dark arrowhead through the air, flattening as a bird is reached; there is a burst of feathers, a triumphant chattering, and the limp victim is borne to the solitudes of the dunes. A week later upon the sand a bleached skeleton will lie, surrounded by a scattered ring of feathers, in company with old bones of rabbits and bead-like shells that tell of ended generations.

The pair rarely separates. Maybe the

leading hawk will miss; its mate follows instantly. Sometimes a third striking is attempted. Usually, however, it is not needed, although the course of the dive, once begun, cannot be altered—either the object is missed entirely or secured. In the pools below the cliffs the sea boils, tossing the spray afar. Shags haunt particular rocks, content in the sunlight. The falcons do not molest them, but they may watch the loving couple high in heaven, and so may the gulls that with yelping plaints rise and fall and glide upon the air. Swiftly and with quick wing-beats the peregrines climb, almost vertically, it would appear. Then a sudden speeding at eighty or ninety miles an hour, a downward dash at the rocks, beaks and wings touching; they hiss past the gulls, swoop apart and glide upwards, uttering their sweetly wild mating cries. Nothing matters in the ecstasies of spring. They may pass uncaring within a few yards of a beholder, when he

may see the neck and wings, slate-ash in colour, the dark crown and nape, the hooked beak and the barred tail. He may shout and wave his arms in excitement, the ravens croak, the gulls scream, the lone buzzard wail as he circles, but the love-chase continues. On the falcons rush, above the crested waves and the marbled troughs of the ocean, past the crannies and the ledges of the precipice, among the summer cloudlets, over the hills of heather and the slopes of golden gorse, by the mounded sand-dunes and the glistening mud-flats; all the heavenly freeness is theirs to roam. Bold they are, and observe no law, but they hunt openly and in defiance—often cursed by the sporting farmer; and yet all of us are proud of our "pregun forlkns."

# MIDSUMMER NIGHT

*(To G. E. R.)*

AGAINST the deep blue of the sky a little money spider was taking a line from one veined ash leaf to another. Although so small, he was easily seen in the waning light, a dark speck moving with great care. It was evening time, and the vesper hymn of warblers and thrushes, pippits and blackbirds, was all but sung.

Throughout the day the great vibrant waves of sunlight were plangent on the cornfields and rushing with golden swell over the bee-visited hedgerows and green meadows, vitalising the slender grasses and red sorrel growing in beauty with branched buttercups and incarnadine poppy flowers. Slowly the day-tide of summer's light and glory ebbed, the sun swung down from heaven and dipped its lower rim into the

ocean. The fields and distant oakwood were laved in yellow light, and like a golden sand gleaming in the western sunlight as the sea recedes, the ebbing tide of sunlight left its pools among the woods and the hedges. Far away some children were singing as they went slowly homewards through the closed buttercups and daisies, and their careless cries were in harmony with the evening.

I sat on a gate and watched the rooks flying over the elm trees in the village below, where all was peace and quiet. The wind sighed through the hedge: a dead leaf moved listlessly, twirling as the wind spun it. The tissues of the tree's dead lung had decayed and sunk into the earth; the winter had been mild, and the invisible hand, composing and decomposing, had not yet touched the filigree web of its brittle frame. On its parent ash tree it hung and quivered, never more to respond to the fire of summer.

Gradually the children reached their homes, and no more cries came from the meadow. The little spider paused half-way between the leaves, and hung quiescent. Perhaps some flaw in his architectural scheme was apparent to him, or he feared that the wind of the summer night would destroy his foundation threads. Born only a few weeks before, without tuition or practice, he knew the angles of his pillars, the proportions of his stanchions, the symmetry and balance of his walls. He had watched no honey-coloured parent at work, yet within his minute brain were the plans of a perfect system to entangle the smallest flying insects, feeble of wing, that would fall against his web.

The pools of gold about the oaks slowly drained away, and the sky above became a more profound blue. Three swifts passed above, wheeling in final flight before creeping to their nests of straw-speck and saliva under the tiles of the church. The songs of the warblers and thrushes as the light drains

away, find an echo in the heart of the poet, for they sing of the beauty of summer: the swift's cries belong to the spectral light of the stars and the mystery of infinite space. The swift is the mystic among birds.

The spider moved on as the first star shone in the sky. Maybe his problem was solved, or that he had waited for the beauteous whiteness of Lyra's ray. Slowly he travelled to the leaf he had chosen as a base, paused awhile, and crept back across his life-line. The rooks were settled in the elm-tops by the church, and their *caa-caas* came less often; the prospects of the next day's forage among the new potatoes had been discussed thoroughly, and were known to all—in satisfaction the colony had settled down to sleep. Gradually the sun sank into the sea, its fire spreading its broad glow through the cloud strata over the far horizon. One by one the stars crept into their places, waiting for the queen-moon to lift her head above the hills of Exmoor.

Antares shone in the south; above were Lyra, Aquila, Northern Crown, and all the heavenly concourse: Mars glowed red, with Spica Virginis swung low in adoration and sending its wan green fires to the watcher. Slowly the afterglow drenched in the gray waters, an owl quavered in loneliness as it fanned over the churchyard; a jackdaw answered sharply, querulously, and night had come to the earth.

A pale golden vapour over the Exmoor hills, and the moon rose, like the head of a yellow moth creeping from its case. It swam into view over the dark hills, and I looked into its face, while it shrank into a silver disk. The sky became lavender-coloured, the moon dust falling with the dew and forming a gauzy veil above. The boom of the waves pounding the distant headland was borne on the wind burthened with foam fragrance and the scent of the sweet clover fields beyond the village. It stirred the green corn, came fitfully, then sighed to silence.

The last labourer left the inn and the village slept. The walls of the cottages gleamed white under the dark thatch as the moonlight fell directly upon them. I was alone with the sapling wheat and all was still.

I was alone with the wheat that I loved. Moving over the field my feet were drenched in an instant by the dew. Lying at full length on the earth, I pressed my face among the sweet wistfulness of stalks, stained and glowing as with some lambent fire, pale, mysterious. On each pale flame-blade depended a small white light, a dew-drop in which the light of the moon was imprisoned. Each flag of wheat held the beauty of pure water, and within the sappy blades glowed the spirit of the earth —in the spectral silence a voice spoke of its ancient lineage: of the slow horses that had strained at the wooden plough through the ages, scarring the glebe in long furrows that must be sown with corn; race after

race of slow horses moving in jangling harness to the deep shouts of the heavy men. Generation after generation of men, bent with age and unceasing labour, plodding the earth, sowing the yellow grains that would produce a million million berries for mankind. Spring after spring, each with its glory of blue-winged swallows speeding, wheeling, falling through the azure, the cuckoo calling in the meadows, and the lark-song shaking its silver earthchain as it strove to be free. Through all the sowings and the reapings for thousands of years the wheat had known that it was grown for man, and the soul of the wheat grew in the knowledge of its service. Lying there on the cool couch of the silver-flotten corn, with the soft earth under me, sweet with its scent of stored sunbeams, the beauty of the phantom wheat carried me away in a passion of sweet ecstasy. Faint as the sea-murmur within the shell, the voice of the corn came to the inward ear. Ever the same

was the earth that it knew, the east washed with faint rosewater in the dayspring, the lark-flight loosened upon the bosom of the dawn wind, and the golden beams of the sun breasting the hills of the morning. It was but a moment since the wild men had goaded the sullen oxen, and with rude implements torn a living from the earth; all the great power of the wheat rested above the growing corn now, of kin to the grains beaten by oxen, and later, by the flails of the wretches who were ever hungry.

The moon floated in the nightpool with the Swan, the distant roar of the surf floated from over the clover fields, and still I lay there, one with the Maker of Life . . . a white mistiness flapped in front, beating broad pinions as it hovered, it dropped to the earth, and a shrill scream trembled into the night. Fluttering like a moth, the ghostly barn owl struggled with the rat, held it in a remorseless clutch of powerful talons. Into the wheatfield the rat had

come, urged by instinct to seek the means of life, and it had found only death. Dreamily the owl fanned the night with his broad wings and then floated away to his nest in the loft of the cottage near the church. Saddened by the consciousness of life's tragedy—every form of life depending for existence on the death of another form—I walked towards the village, while a landrail began his jarring *crake-crake* in the corn, and little moths went down to drink the honey of the night-opening flowers, living their short life while the moon, soon to die, was in its fullest beauty. Antares was a dull red ember in the south: the star of summer that Richard Jefferies loved. My thought was with him—he was near me, though the body had long been lying in Broadwater. Had he spoken to me in this mystic June night, I wondered; and then a blackcap warbler sang in a thorn bush; my thought was as old as its song, and I doubted no longer.

## A FEATHERED WASTER

No bird-lovers can but desire the destruction of the Little Owl (*Athene Noctua*), a prolific bird introduced into England half a century ago by Lord Lilford. It has no redeeming trait. I have watched several pairs, and my observations show without doubt that he is not worth his salt, and deserves not the slightest mercy.

Old Bob, a keeper with whom I am very friendly, showed me a pollard oak standing at the side of a hazel covert, which he suspected as the home of a pair of these birds. I sat down in the dry ditch and waited, while the humble bees swung themselves among the flowering nettles. This was in the early afternoon, and not in the evening or the night; in the bright sunlight, when all self-respecting owls are dreaming in barn-loft or hollow tree. But

to the Little Owl time is obviously money, for it was not long before a brown bird, not unlike a large thrush, fluttered out of the tree and flew to a may hedge running at right angles to the covert. A large white cabbage butterfly drifted past, and was captured dexterously by the alien. Now cabbage butterflies are a distinct pest, so one good mark was registered to the accused. Shortly he descended into the sapling corn, probably to take a beetle or mouse, and as these are not yet valuable as human food he was given another good mark.

He flew away after this, and landed a hundred yards down the hedge. Something drew his attention, something that was in the hedge itself. He dropped to the ground, and through my glasses I could see that he was climbing up the branches. When he returned, it was with something in his beak. I ran over the field and found that he had been robbing

a chaffinch's nest of its fledgling young. A weasel will do this, or a rat, and often a crow. But an owl! I was ashamed of my own kin.

I decided to advise the keeper to shoot all Little Owls.

Later in the day the little pirate seized a thrush, nearly as big as himself, and perching on it falcon-fashion, commenced to tear at the breast. I love the thrushes, for they do great good in the spring, destroying snails and worms. Besides, they voice with such ecstasy the joyful spirit of spring returned to the cold earth; in the winter they fill the heart with hope for the future. Most certainly the Little Owl would be outlawed.

During succeeding days I watched the pair eating worms; hunting, stoat-wise, in the ditch for baby rabbits; hovering over the meadow, like kestrel hawks, for mice and rats. Once I saw them catch a frog. And I knew that later on the partridge

chicks would be taken. There was no doubt in my own mind that he must be shot and trapped whenever possible. I would tell Old Bob to bring along his twelve-bore.

With this determination in my mind I thought I would look at the nest. Now most owls will fly out when disturbed and leave the eggs or young to their fate. Much to my surprise, this bird sat tight. I broke a twig off and prodded her gently. She refused to budge. I pushed a little harder. With a mew like a distressed cat she left her four eggs and ran quickly to a hidden corner of the platform on which they were laid (the eggs were just visible as I looked down at them through a small hole in the top of the tree).

But she did not leave them uncovered for long, for with another cry of pain she crept over them again, covering them with her body. Again I tapped her with the stick, but she was obstinate. She was

evidently decided to risk death in the protection of her unborn little ones.

Later, over at the rearing field, I saw Old Bob.

"Well, sir, do ee reckon 'em to be proper vermin?"

"No, Bob," I said casually, looking at his weather-rutted hands. "No, they eat mostly beetles and mice, I think, and an occasional sparrow or so. I don't think they will hurt your chicks."

Mere sentiment, of course, but the mother whined so wistfully, and her little body was so soft when I, like a great bully, prodded her with the stick. Besides, she was an owl, and blood is thicker than water.

## INVOCATION

THROUGHOUT the long glaring days of July pitiful cries quiver in the heat; the sheep are dying of thirst. Even some of the hill-springs are now mere trickles.

This north coast of Devon is mocked by the vision of the bluest of seas, calm and shining under the summer sun. The fields stretching down to the sands are parched and brown, the grasses mere ghosts, dry and sapless. Even the sea breeze has little of refreshment in its motion; it is merely heated air.

Many of the sheep are dead. Jackdaws, gulls, carrion crows, and rooks are feasting on the bloated carcases which remain; the shimmering hum of flies innumerable gives to our English midsummer a tropical semblance. Nor are there any swallows to decimate these pests. I have seen about

four pairs this year—the first pair, which arrived on the last day of March, was taken by the peregrine falcons. Swifts and house-martins are not scarce, but they keep to the inland villages.

The prolonged drought seems to have brought to life several rare butterflies, but even the interest that one may find in these is small. Even the blue sky and the blue sea produce an intolerable weariness. Wherever I go there sound those pitiful cries of the sheep; there is the slippery grass, and the glare of the sun on the sward. The wheat is yellow in the flag, dried and rustling; the poppies are sickly, though usually the fiercer the sun the more sultry their bloom.

A brook runs through sandhills on the other side of the headland, and at one place the red cattle stand in cool water to their dewlaps, gazing tranquilly about them. Here is the great meeting place of the birds, and at any time of the day, from dawn

to sunset, its pebbly shallow is thronged with finches, pippits, doves, warblers, and cuckoos. How the goldfinches love the water! With sweet, reedy twitterings a flock will come from orchard haunts and bathe in the running water, the yellow-barred wings aflutter and crimson faces dipped again and again. Copper finches follow, with perhaps those minute travellers the Golden Crowned Knights, as the country folk so beautifully term the smallest British bird.

Other creatures know of this avian meeting-place. The weasel comes, and a great sombre pair of ravens; and the sparrowhawk dashes sometimes in the midst, seizing one of the bathers. To me this is a place of pilgrimage, where all things come down to the life-giving waters. Even here, however, there is heard in the heated air those sad cries from the hills.

A village girl showed me some verses she had written on the drought. She was

singing by the waterside, a little maid in a print dress. With shy eyes she tendered the poem. I remember the last verse:—

*God of Pity, I beseech Thee,*
*Send us rain in healing shower,*
*For the fields I see around me*
*Death and Ruin hold in power.*

But from the west comes no cloud; only the fiery sun burns in a pitiless sky.

## COCKNEY BIRD TRIPPERS

My work necessitated long hours in London, and I used to bless the sparrows; I was never tired of watching them. They lifted my mind from dusty pavements and the smell of motor traffic. A favourite place to see them was a garden adjoining a church in Gracechurch Street; another was by the fountains of Trafalgar Square. About the time of harvest in the country, for which I pined, I used to notice an absence of the winged urchins. Where before a noisy, squabbling party congregated in the park or near the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, in August a solitary couple or two hopped quietly. These, I imagined, had not answered the call that came to their dingy brethren, the same call that came to the weary Londoner at that period of the year.

The sparrows go into the country. Where the corn is cut and shocked you will see them in vast flocks, searching in the stubble or openly robbing the ripe ears. It is no uncommon thing to observe a thousand or more in one field. And perhaps as you watch a swooping hawk will flash over the hedgerow, the cloud will arise, chattering in terror; one miserable victim will be seized and carried swiftly away. Almost before the last floating feather has drifted to the ground the flock will be back, greedy for the golden grains. Perhaps there is some deep philosophy among the wild creatures, for immediately the danger of death is past they have forgotten it, and continue to live every moment in complete happiness.

Male chaffinches and other finches often join the trippers. So ready are sparrows to imitate, or perhaps to return to natural conditions long since abandoned in the city, that after a few pastoral days their

chirps become sweeter, resembling the silvery *spink spink* of their gay cousins.

The sparrow has the power to produce sweet notes, but in the rush of a big city he has become careless regarding his personal appearance, his song, and the construction of nest.

About the second week of September the bird trippers come back, their voices clearer and their feathers sprucer. After a while, however, they return to their old habits, quarrelsome and untidy as before.

## "FULLNESS AFTER DEARTH"

(*September*, 1921.)

WHERE the fields were scorched and drab during the drought the sweet green grass is growing. Gone are those gaping fissures in the slopes by the sea, those swarms of flies about the dead sheep, and the crows and jackdaws ever glutted with carrion. Many summery flowers that should have formed their seeds had no chance to bloom; but now the rains have blessed them, and everywhere their colours and scents have been made from cold earth, sunshine, and a dot of life.

In mythology the goddess of spring returned to the bleak woodlands and barren fields, scattering life and song as she wandered. Nowadays we do not believe in pagan deities, but the idea survives, like poetry, for ever. That *something* has returned

to this wild and lovely land by the sea there can be no doubt. In every dry ditch the nettles are springing up, and the white blossom already crests some of the clusters. The spade-shaped leaves of the celandine —a flower that usually comes in February or March, and resembles a buttercup— are among the grasses in the meadows, the cuckoo-plants are rising, a lark has two eggs in her nest, while her mate sings with vernal ecstasy high above.

The hedge-banks are refreshed with young seedling plants, dandelions, hawk-weeds, speedwell, thistles, lords-and-ladies, and a score of others. I know a damp patch by the roadway where every spring giant docks grow. In July their immense leaves, three feet long, turn crimson and brown; in August tall spires of rusty seeds are prepared, and the stalks stand next spring. This year, however, the seeds were dropped in June. Now the plants are putting forth fresh leaves that

over-shadow the tiny efforts of their offsprung life. Those docks have been there a generation, and are still unwearied—they must have launched millions of seeds into the light.

The swallows are still singing, but the chill nights are a sign to them. Yesterday a young bird flew full-tilt into the wall of a barn, and was picked up dead. It was blind, and had been so since birth. How had it existed till now? I am inclined to think that it had lost its parents, who hitherto must have been shepherding it.

Or perhaps it had seen the goddess Proserpine come back into the September days of gold and royalest blue, and had paid the penalty of vision. I burnt the tiny corpse on a bramble-fire; its ashes went up in smoke and spark towards the sun.

## CUCKOO NOTES

Most people know that the "cuckoo lays its eggs in another bird's nest."

The few will say that the cuckoo does nothing of the sort, that she will lay her egg on the ground somewhere, and then carry it either by beak or foot to the selected nest, deposit it there, and fly away. They will say (once I said the same thing) that "it never actually lays in another nest." They are wrong, in one case, at any rate.

This spring a hedge sparrow built its nest in the rough edge of a pile of faggots. In the course of time four pale blue eggs appeared, and one morning very early a large bird flew down to it. She must have remained there for some time, for as I strolled past when the sun was just rising above the hills she flew off the nest. I knew by

the flight that the bird was a cuckoo. Below the pile of faggots, on the ground, lay the scattered remains of the eggs, and the cuckoo, before *laying* her solitary egg in the nest, had apparently sucked all four of them.

I feared that the hedge sparrows would desert the nest, which now surely was but an empty mock, with its one alien egg. In the ordinary way one will find the cuckoo's egg amongst the others, in some cases exchanged for one belonging to the nest. When the young cuckoo is hatched, he displays great irritation if anything touches his back, and will not rest till the other occupants of the nest, whether eggs or fledgelings like himself, are cast out. The parent birds show an indifference to these unfortunates, and all their efforts are for the intruder.

Thus I was considerably surprised to find that the female sparrow was sitting on the strange egg. Had I, before the

tragedy, taken the four eggs away, and placed instead an egg of a robin or a thrush, it is practically certain that it would have been ignored. Both parent birds were near when the female cuckoo was laying her egg, and kept flying round the nest, accompanied by a robin who may have been, like myself, a curious spectator in this domestic affair.

Five weeks afterwards the young cuckoo was many times the size of his wretched foster parents, and throughout the long days of June they worked in the hedges, seeking caterpillars, grubs, and spiders for their querulous nestling.

The migration of the young cuckoo in August is helped by a most interesting series of ingenious frauds. The old cuckoos depart for the south in July, and the younger birds making their way independently, day by day, are directed only by instinct. But the baby cannot feed itself (or probably will not, being a born parasite), and the

poor little pair of birds who have slaved for it will not follow him when the wander-lust comes into his blood. The method of cadging a meal is as extraordinary as it is utterly callous.

The cad will fly ten or twelve miles a day in a southerly direction. At intervals he cries in an infantile, screaming voice. There is bound to be near a pair of birds with young, and should they hear the cry, they leave their own children and go and feed the wide-mouthed impostor. No small birds, *with fledgelings*, appear to be able to resist the call. They go and feed him. The fact that the young cuckoo bears a resemblance to a kestrel hawk, both in flight and colour, makes their charity all the more mysterious. Down to the south he wanders, his wings getting stronger every day, until the time comes when the sea shines in the distance, and his long journey begins. And throughout the days of his English stay, he lives on the foolish

and charitable ones among the smaller, insectivorous birds.

Sometimes he is a positive blackguard. One year (1914) I found a cuckoo's egg in a tiny nest of a common wren. When hatched, and only after much difficulty, he hoisted out all his companions, or squashed them, until he broke the nest (round like a ball, and with the hole about an inch or so in diameter in the side) and squatted insolently on top of it. The wrens, with their upright, barred little tails ever jerking with pride, fed him incessantly. The female worked so hard, and the cuckoo was so greedy, that eventually the top of her head was devoid of all feathers, and made quite raw by the beak of her wonder-child. But she was very brave, and was apparently quite indifferent to the risk she ran of one day disappearing altogether. I have often wondered if cuckoos have the power of projecting into other birds the maternal love, or instinct, that is so obviously

deficient in themselves. This seems to be the logical conclusion to draw, even if it be incomprehensible to the man who in human life thinks in terms of matter and the individual, instead of the spirit and the species.

*1916.*

## DAYS OF AUTUMN

One morning in the hollows of the meadow land below the wood lay a silver mist. The sun sweeping upwards in its curve beat this away towards noon, but it was a sign. The fire of autumn was kindled: already the little notched leaves of the hawthorn were tinged with the rust of decay, already a bramble leaf was turning red: soon the flames would mount the mightier trees and fan their pale heat among the willows and ash trees round the lake, lick among the drooping elms and the lacquered oaks, and sweep in abandonment with yawning fire of colour through the old beech forest.

Years ago now, in the glamorous time of childhood, this coming of the mist in the morning with its fragrance arising from the earth peculiar to summer's end—the fumous, clinging smell of a torch—filled

me with great sadness. No birds sang in the woods. By the mere, about this time, hundreds of swallows would gather. Restlessly they clung to the sedges and the rushes, whose tips were beginning to brown and make faint whisper in the wind; now flinging themselves into the air, twittering, mounting high, wheeling and slipping, now descending like a shower of iron darts to the border of the lake. Sometimes on my way to school I went to watch them, being caught occasionally as I crept in through an unofficial entrance to the school, and punishment ensued. What use to explain the poignant feelings about autumn and the departure of my beautiful swallows to lands where I could not follow? More important to the boy were his forced learnings than his blundering and unconscious poetry; and the sunlight came through the window, making him miserable. In fancy he was roaming the old hills, or dreaming by the brook; and that was indolence—he would

never fit himself for the conflict of a mature life in London by idleness and dreaming. So the little boy was often punished, and frequently occupied the lowest seat of his form.

As the days went on the swallows were more anxious. The cuckoos and the swifts had long since departed. Here and there in the fountain-shaped elms a yellow patch of leaves showed like a spilled plash of water imprisoning a sunbeam. The peggles on the hawthorns were reddening; and waving their pennants in the wind the dry rustling of the sedges came across the water with excited notes of the swallows. As one swept by, low in flight, the deep blue of his wings, their exquisite and soft uplift, the delicacy of the forked tail, were reflected on the surface; with a sighing sound he would pass and his liquid image glide on the mirrored surface below him.

The mornings were chilly, but the vagrants continued to hold their parliament

in the rushes. Inset life was on the wane, adventure stirred their little hearts to excitement. Every passing of the wind beckoned a forlorn following of leaves from the trees, a spider seeking hibernation threw a prospecting line of silk against the face. With a tired sound the starred sycamore leaves, each condemned by the black patch of autumn, fluttered to the earth; by listening closely it was possible to hear the stalks break from the twigs. Flittering like chafer beetles in a dusky summer night the vaned seeds risped and whirled away from the parent trees. As yet the conflagration had not caught the forest, only isolated flames browned a beech tree, scorched the branch of an ash with yellow or made a buff haze in the distant oaks. It seemed as though the funeral pyre of dead summer would blaze in majesty only when the swallows had left.

One afternoon their shriller notes told that the hour was approaching. So eager

were they among themselves that I was permitted to approach within a yard of them. I could see their frail claws, and admire the slim outline of their bodies; a melancholy admiration, like that of age with a young heart for youth and beauty that it yearns to share; the swallows were much to me, but I was nothing to them. Suddenly with a rush of wings they swept up, soon to become a smudge against the sky. But the wind was not favourable, or the message anticipated had not arrived, for they returned to the sedges that never ceased to shiver of coming dreariness. The autumnal air was tranquil in its silence and solitude; the wings of gnats dancing their mazy columns assumed in the sunshine a fairy semblance. Over the waters sped the swallows, taking the last banquet, for once the long journey were commenced no halt would be made for food; the thousands of miles over sea and land must be passed without falter,

urged and directed by the ancient instinct developed long before Zoroaster came from the plains of Iran with his Magian worship.

The next morning when I went to bid them farewell the lake was deserted. My friends had gone, and I had not said good-bye. During the night a wind had risen, and they had fled before it to the warm south. I prayed that their strength did not fail while the little things were over the cold gray sea. I could do no more. But my heart was heavy.

When the migrants have departed the fires of autumn throw their flames and falling shadows rapidly over the country-side. In the morning moisture drip-drips from the trees, their tops are wraithed in mist, and the jay screams as he lurks among the acorns. Every day the sun describes a lower curve and, red and small, looms through the vapours. But above he is spinning and carding the mist, warmth

blows on the cheek as for a moment brightness streams down, and so happiness comes again. Once more the thoughts of desolation are dispelled like the mist, and hope rises anew to the heart. In the murmuring green of spring, the radiant birdsong of summer, it is indeed difficult to be sad. Though all human efforts seem without avail, the song and scent and colour of summer fills the yearning heart and assuages its broken hopes. But in autumn and winter, at least for a long time, no consolation was there anywhere. Underfoot the old paths were beaten into mire by the passing of feet; these were the leaves, each so perfect and veined and shaped, that had opened from buds to the croon of wild doves and the tap-tap of woodpeckers. Nature seemed to care nothing for the things that were created: the hand that composed so lovingly decomposed as inevitably.

To youth the world seemed bitterly cruel

and uncaring, for every form of life—except those idealists, the bees—survived by the death of another form. The declining days with their ebb of warmth killed the million million insects and butterflies whose hum had been so dim and happy in the summer.

By a dry mossy bank underneath a hedge of bullace in whose unleafed raggedness the sere and twisted chords of the traveller's joy had grown, the willow herb flowers were still in bloom when October had yielded most of its blackberries. Below the pink flowers and on the same stem the long pods were splitting and their seeds, swung under down, drifting with the wind. As I watched, a humble bee, numbed with cold sought the sanctuary of a pink flower, clung for a moment swaying, then fell to the moss below and lay still on its side. The hooked legs moved feebly, the wings shivered; no warmth came from the weak sunshine, and so it died.

By night a mouse would consume its body—beautiful with the bar of tawny velvet on its duskiness. From the time of early spring, when first the willow wren had called by the stream, the bee had climbed over the flowers, bartering the gold grains of the pollen for the honey that it desired so eagerly. In April it had gone to the apple blossom in the orchard and heavy-odoured nettles filling the ditches; invaded the sanctities of all the flowers of summer's lavishing. Busy was my hunchback bee, feeding on no other form of life, helping the birth of the seeds to which the hue and scent of the petals were servant, working for the future of her race, utterly selfless; humming a wander-song as the sun strengthened its vanes, now fretted by toil and labour.

Then there was no hope anywhere, no voice among the trees, nothing but the feeble winnowing of the leaves as they sank to the earth, and the dazed drone of a dying fly.

In the beechwood the split covers of the mast crushed under the feet, the leaves were crisped and curled. No cunning of sculptor in copper could fashion such as these. The beech tree is indeed the aristocrat of the forest, for it is superb at the fall. No leaves possess such a rich colour or have the appearance of majesty and preserved form. The elm leaves are drab and lifeless, the oak leaves blotched and frayed; from the horse chestnut the big green splayed leaves are either withered and rusted or drop when seemingly full of sap. The elderberry and the ash loosen their sprays at the first singe of autumn's fire. But gradually dyed a deep golden-brown, and untouched by fungus or blight, the leaves of the beech preserve their outline and take on a silkiness and shining of surface. Seen against the blue sky the veins and arteries of each leaf are clear-cut and distinct; no degeneration in the beech tree. During the autumn the numerous summer

tenants of the wood have quitted. There is silence in the cold air. Old and twisted, the beech trees have yielded generations of leaves uncurling from torch-like windings when first the swallows come across the sea; the rooks built in their massy summer greeneries; woodpeckers hewn a nesting place in the rotten boles, spreading a whiteness of chips on the moss beneath; starlings with wings of metallic gleaming stolen their old trysts, and jackdaws nested where the branches had decayed and gaped. Far down across the fields yonder the rooks are following the plough. The jackdaws have joined them, and as light ebbs at evening they will return in a long stream to the rookeries.

The starlings haunt the watermeadows, the mocking cry of the green "gallypot" is heard no more. Walking quietly through the solitude of the wood the wanderer may see a squirrel storing his granaries with mast and acorns, working earnestly lest

the frost come early and bind the earth till the sun of March shall solve its graven pattern.

From the edge of the wood the field slopes downwards to the longpond, now covered with a haze in the sunshine. The rushes fringing its edge are rusted and bent like old Roman swords, the reeds like the spears of ancient Britons, thrown with Arthur's sword, into the lake. By the pebbled shore the water is pure and clear and gloomy, the sunlight showing the moist brown velvet of the leaves upon its bed. Quietly feeding in the centre, a dozen moor-hens send ripples to the side, each wavelet bearing a shifting line of light over the leaves as it travels forward. Yonder the sallows have loosened their slips of leaves and the sunshine throws up their ruddy and yellow wands—broken segments of a rainbow trembling by the marge. A wren goes by, a fluttering moth of a bird, silent; sipping and twittering in sweet

cadences a flock of goldfinches passes over towards the patch of thistledown in the meadow. A chuckling, rattling sound; the fieldfares and redwings have arrived from Scandinavian forests.

The path through the higher wood was covered with leaves, and bordered by bleached stalks of wild parsley and crumbling sorrel spires. From the tall grasses the sap went with summer, and like frail ghosts they drooped over the pathway. The sun was warm, as though it were celandine-time. Upright and pallid under the trees, and lit by the warm sunshine, the stalks of the year's bluebells bore their skull-like caps filled with their black shining seeds. Even as the wind stirred the branches of the trees the old loved shadow lacings slipped and shuffled on the ground. The wind sounded as in summer, the loveliest goldy-brown brimmed the hollows under the oaks. The phantoms of summer were with me as I leant against a sapling, the

cast feather of a chaffinch swung on a spider's line encircling the trunk waved a gentle farewell. Where the shafts of sunlight lingered among the brambles their leaves were fired a lucent green; autumn is kind to the bramble, touching a leaf here and there only with blood red splash.

I waited under the oak, unable to leave the warmth and tranquillity. A cloud hid the sun. I wanted to see the beauteous light come again through the rifted clouds, to see the staining of the bramble leaves. Once more the sun gilded the bare branches, colouring the red berries of the holly that would feed the thrushes in winter, and lacquering the beech trees till they seemed like the tawny beards of vikings.

Somewhere in the wood was the ghost of Proserpine returned to see how her children were faring—under the leaves were the seeds that would bring forth bloom

and beauty and fragrance in the spring; deep in the earth lay the cocoons and shells whence would arise the happy throng of summery moths and butterflies. For this is the purpose of autumn: rest and quietude for those who have laboured throughout the summer to ensure life for their kind. So now in autumn my hope is as firm as the oak. Every leaf that falls is pushed from its hold by a bud awaiting the mystic order to unfold itself in spring; every flower lives but to form its seeds. All through the centuries the spirits of the flowers and the wild things have been growing more beautiful in the knowledge of their service.

As I walked away a timid song sounded on the air. Somewhere a robin was singing. He was not made miserable by thought—he was happy every moment. He did not need to brood upon immortality—he lived unconscious of time—every moment was *lived*, the beauty of the earth and the sun,

and his mate, all accepted without question. The robin lives like an immortal here, upon the earth that is so beautiful: and all the wisdom of the dead civilisations is nothing to what the robin's song tells, if you will but listen.

## SWALLOW BROW: *A Fantasy*

*(To P. T.)*

THAT morning as she brushed her hair little Jo felt a great joy in her heart, for the sunlight was making bright the room. Her real name was Mary, but they called her Jo for short. She dropped her brush and leaned out, while a blackbird with a yellow bill flew to the top of one of the apple trees in the garden and commenced to flute in a rich, beautiful voice. Then a wild bee crawled on the window-sill and began to clean gauzy wings with his legs. Little Jo watched him with the eager look that some small children have when regarding the lesser works of God, and thought that his body was very velvety, with a sash tied round the middle of it. A lark sang over the cornfield behind the garden, and she wanted to sing and shout, for everything

was so lovely in the world. But it was nearly time for breakfast, and mother would be angry if she went downstairs after her sisters and brothers had eaten their porridge, so with her heart singing like the gold-bill outside, she picked up her brush and peered into the mirror.

Her face stared back at her, with its dark eyes and shyly smiling mouth. Then a June rose seemed to hover in each cheek, shedding their petals to give her beauty: and her eyes shone.

"Oh, you are pretty," she thought, touching the glass with her hand.

She was soon dressed, and ran downstairs, almost falling in her eagerness to move, for the sunshine that came from over the orchard was still spinning its thread of happiness in her heart, as it was in the heart of the lark who sang above the green corn.

All breakfast time she thought of the face looking back at her from behind the

mirror, and hardly heard the talk about the two visitors coming that day.

After the meal, when Great-uncle Sufford had gone into his study to read the paper before going down to the meadow to paint, Michael pulled her hair and said roughly, for he was her eldest brother, "What were you grinning at during brekker, eh, kid?"

"Nothing," replied Jo, wishing she had a stick to bang his ankles.

"Well, ugly-face, if you are contemplating ragging my room, or sewing my pyjamas up, or trying any nonsense, you look out," he said with the dignity of one whose voice had broken six weeks and three days.

"I'm not ugly-face!" she cried.

"Ho, aren't you! You're worse!" He pulled her hair again.

"Oh, I hate you, Micky."

She ran out of the room, and upstairs in her bedroom she stared mournfully at her own image. It was true, she was an ugly-face, as Michael had said! Oh, and she

wanted to be pretty, just to please other people.

Her mouth trembled, and a tear rolled down her cheek. Another and another fell, until she could not see anything, for the mirror was all misty.

"Oh, I want to be beautiful," she sobbed. "Dear God, make me nice-looking."

A butterfly drifted in at the open window and flew towards her as though she were a flower. Then feeling that the gold-dust that came from the great blue sky no longer warmed the white and black bars of his sails, he flickered out again.

Little Jo brushed her eyes, and tripped down the stairs, her misery gone. She ran into the kitchen garden, down the path, past the flowering beans and the cabbages, and through the gate into the cornfield. Soon she reached the brook and flung herself down suddenly at its edge.

She watched the water rippling past, and

the green waterweed waving to her. A school of roach went by, the light showing their bright red fins. Little Jo wondered if the fishes knew that they had lovely red fins, and if it was nice to stir the water with them. Behind her the corn seemed to sigh as the wind swept over, as though it knew of coming midsummer, with its hum over the fields, for that meant that August would follow, and the reapers come with the horses and machines.

Then she wondered if the sun loved the brook, for it shook with silvery flashes, and sang a sweet song where it ran into an eddy just by her feet. She was always wondering things. She turned on her back and tried to see a lark in the sky. It was so warm lying there in the sun, and the bees from her Great-uncle Sufford's hives went over to the clover fields. So warm, and the tiny brook-song so sweet, that her eyes closed. Still the water murmuring softly and the lovely summer sun

kissing her. She wondered dreamily if you felt like that when you were in heaven: then remembered that she was ugly and with a small sigh fell asleep.

A swallow flew low over the water, dipping his chestnut breast in the stream. Immediately Jo sat up and clapped her hands.

"Swallow, swallow," she cried, "how little you are!"

"Am I, my love?" twittered the bird, circling over her head.

"Your wings are so blue, little swallow."

The bird dived from above and perched at the edge of the brook. Jo could see his slim wings folded over his tail. He took one dainty sip, and then sped, light as a spider's thread, into the air.

"Come back, little swallow," she called, "come and perch on my finger. Unless you are afraid," she added wistfully.

"I will come," said the swallow. She could feel the tiny claws just touching her fingers.

"We are not afraid of you, my love," he twittered, "we know that you would not hurt us."

"Who told you?" she asked in wonder.

"The blackbird who sings on the highest branch of the apple tree by your window, and the humble bees, and the goldfinch into whose nest you peered without touching, and the baby hare you stroked, and all the wild folk."

"But do they know then how I love them, little swallow?"

"Why, yes," the bird answered softly, "all the wild things know when a man or a child loves them. Do you not remember the sparrows eating from the hand of an old man in London when you went there one day last year? And how they had no fear of him, but when a lady approached wearing what is called by some a beautiful hat, they all flew away?"

"Yes, I remember, dear swallow."

"Well, my love, those despised sparrows

knew that on that hat were the skins of nineteen humming birds, and though they knew that they themselves would not be desired, or have to give up their lives for the cause of beauty, yet they did not like the woman."

"Oh, I hate her, I hate her," cried Jo.

"Hush," said the swallow. "When she bought the hat she did not think of nineteen of our tiny brothers killed for a hat. She was really a kind woman, only she never thought very much."

"Tell me," said the child, very happy, looking at his glorious wings, "Tell me, why do you speak to me? Do you speak to every one?"

"No," said the swallow sadly, "I want to, but they will not listen. I know that the meadow grasses want to as well, but most of the people seem to be deaf. The meadow grasses talk to the butterflies and the coloured insects that dance among them, for they come to listen to the music of

the wind as it swings the little gray and purple pollen-bells that you love to knock off with your hand. And the sound you hear is sometimes the love whisper of the stems as they tell one another that the baby seeds are being born. For if the seeds are born before the mowers come they are very happy. It is always so among the wild flowers, my love. All they live for is the seeds."

"I am sad when I see the grasses cut," said Jo, "for often the little larks are killed and the sorrel dies, and the golden buttercups, and all the sweet flowers."

"Do not be sad, darling," twittered the swallow, "for all beauty must die. And beauty gives itself willingly in death when it loves. I remember when I was young we passed over a strange land at dawn, just as the light was coming to cheer us, and below were still figures on the slopes of the hill. We knew that they had given their lives to save their beautiful land: we

knew because the wind told us that he had carried their spirits away at the moment of death."

Little Jo began to sob again.

"Hush, my love, for is not the sun shining and the brook singing its wander-song? We do not know death, for all we think of is the lovely life we have now. The swallows do not struggle as you wise ones do, or kill one another, but each has sufficient and no more. And oh, we are so happy."

"I am not happy, little swallow, for I am ugly."

"My love, you are beautiful, for your heart is kind. We all love you so very much. And one day, when you are older, some one will come to you, some one to whom I talk now as I talk to you, and he will tell you that you are beautiful. He is great friends with the owl, who calls to him at night. But at present he is only a little boy."

"How lovely," Jo cried, jumping up

and dancing. "Will he be long in coming? And will he have a horse, and a sword, and a squire to take off his armour?"

"One day he will have a sword, and he will be brave although his heart may be heavy. And when that is over, he will be sad for a long time, but always brave. But that is years to come. Sometimes even now he is sad, for his mother is dead, and his father thinks that he will grow up wild. Yet he is often jolly and naughty, especially with his friends in a wood. His name is Willie, and he is nine years old."

"I must be beautiful when he sees me," said the child-woman, "or he will go away."

"He will only go away if you do not want him," twittered the swallow, preening his feathers, "and one day he will need you very badly."

"Oh, but I shall want my little boy," she said, "and when I meet him I will tell him I'm his friend. But I am ugly," and her eyes filled with tears.

"My love," breathed the swallow, perching on her shoulder, "I have a gift for you, which I give gladly. It is all I have, and soon the meadow grasses will fall, and the roses on the hedges, and then we will be told by the wind that we must go again over the great sea into which so many of us fall. I shall have to die soon, so it does not matter," he added to himself, but Jo did not hear, for she was wondering what the gift would be.

"Good-bye, dear," whispered the swallow presently, "and do not forget us when you grow up. So many do."

"No, swallow, no, but come back soon, and give my little boy a kiss for me, because he hasn't any mummy."

The swallow rose high in the air, and in gay flight sped over the cornfield; a swift brown bird dashed after him; a few light feathers danced in the air; a tiny poppy suddenly bloomed on a bended flag of wheat.

"O swallow," wept the child. "O little, little swallow."

Her heart still murmured with sadness as she went down the path towards home, past Great-uncle Sufford and a strange man, both painting at their easels. Jo wanted to look at his picture, but she thought that he might think her rude. At first he frightened her when he jumped up and exclaimed, "Oh, let me sketch your head, little lady. Beautiful, glorious!" speaking rapidly to himself, "such an angle, and glorious uplift!" But his eyes looked kind, and already she liked him. And Great-uncle Sufford was laughing.

"Don't be frightened," he said, "but just let Mr. Norman sketch your forehead. My child, I have only just noticed it. You have the most perfect brows I have ever seen, blue-black like a swallow wing, and such an angle! Norman, you must make your picture worthy of Jo."

So she stood before him, smiling and

with shining eyes, and once more the spirit of the wild rose was in her cheeks. The strange painter-man liked her!

Now, behind the hedge Michael, her eldest brother, was crouching, having crept sinuous and Indian-like, down to the hedge to track the two artists. He watched with disgust what was happening, and determined to take it out of Mary later on. Michael was already disgusted because another stupid girl had arrived in the house a little while ago, and was staying a week.

"Now, I must thank you," beamed the bearded stranger, "for your beauty has inspired me, you sweet fairy. Now we'll all go home, and you must meet my little daughter Elsie."

He picked her up and kissed her lightly and Jo kissed him back, although his face tickled, for he was kind and had said that she was a fairy.

## WINTER'S EVE

*(To T. H. H. T.)*

"*Woo—oo—oo—.*"

Long drawn out as though the note is bubbling through water, it quavers from the dark wood yonder, seen in the dim light of the stars. From the other wood, across the grass land, a plain hoot floats back. *Woo-loo, woo-loo!* No sound of wings beating—the flight of the wood owl is silent, his broad wings, covered with the softest down, fan the air as he proceeds through the wood.

*Woo—oo! Woo—oo!* There is mystery in the cry. All other creatures are silent, except the field mice and voles running over the ground. They cannot be seen by the human eye, but I can hear their squeaks. Again the faraway answer haunts across the darkness over the grass. The

leaves have fallen long ago, they lie black and rotting on the ground. Those that drifted down when summer died have already merged into the earth whence will come the bluebells in April. But a short time since they were scurrying over the grass and among the bramble bushes, all crisp and brown. The wind caught them up and whirled them in their thousands: then came the time of wintry rains and mists. Their brittleness went, they sank into the earth.

The owl is silent. He has fanned his way from branch to branch, peering to the ground. The slightest movement is watched by his large eyes. A little dark thing running quickly over the leaves, a silent glide to the ground, wings fanning the air, the clutch of a powerful foot, a faint shriek as talons sink into the warm body, and then to the trees again. The mouse is swallowed whole. The faintest of squeaks from behind, the owl's head

turns and he peers down on the ground. The eyes are fixed, but the head can be turned completely round. Those large ears, hidden by the tiny feathers—the ear-cavity being twice the size of an eye—take in every sound, even as the eyes can see in the dark night. The faint squeak came from a rat that runs swiftly on the trail of another. The next moment his body is seized in a grip of death—he, too, screams, and is borne upward, limp and dead, to be devoured at leisure. The owl's beak opens to a wide gape, and a deep contralto hoot, bubbling and quavering, carries to his mate who hunts in the distant copse.

Heard thus in the loneliness of the winter night, there seems infinite sadness in the deep mellow cries of these night fliers. To hear an owl hooting repeatedly around the cottage at night is supposed, in the country, to portend death. It is easy to imagine how such a superstition arose. The species of owl that hoots, sounding like the call of

a lost soul from the blur of the forest, remains concealed during the day, perched up against the bole of a fir tree, or in the cavity of a hollow oak or elm. At night they are seen occasionally and by chance, as their broad wings beat against the sky. Any such cries, lonesome and ghostly, coming in the dark, can mean but one thing to the countryman—death.

What fantasies are called up on a night like this, leaning up against the barred gate, alone! Away in front, the dark, level grass land—beyond, the forest. A sky bright with stars gleaming and winking, high up, unattainable. There is Sirius, the largest star, flaming with sudden molten crimson, then flashing a blue spearhead of light. Possibly there is a mist around that sun, so many millions of miles away, that breaks up the light as the prism of glass does the colours of the spectrum. Over the thick blackness in front a figure is moving—or am I imagining things? Just

a faint feeling of fear, the nerves strung up, caused perhaps by slumbering instinct. Thousands of years ago a figure coming stealthily nearer in the darkness might mean an enemy. I glance over my shoulder; there is a feeling that some one might leap on to my back. But as he draws nearer I can hear his footfalls in the frosty grass and his laboured breath—it is one of the farm hands going home from the inn. He climbs over the gate, starts violently as he sees me standing here, and bids me good-night. I answer, adding that I have been listening to the owls. He politely tells me that there are a "good few on 'em about," but to himself says that I am mazed. Then he passes on, his steps get fainter and fainter, and I am alone.

*Yak wrik! Yak-yak-wrik!* low over my head. A blood-curdling noise if ever there was one. The latter part of the screech, the *wrik*, is considerably higher in tone than the former part. The barn owl passed

over the gate, just above my head and only when he startled me with his cry—not long and sobbing as the wood-owl, but sharp and high-pitched—did I know that he had gone. A white mistiness in the night, wings beating slower than those of his hooting brother, and the white or barn owl had drifted over the grass, hunting the mice and field vole.

The barn owl is more common than the wood or brown owl. The former is snow white on its breast and under its wings. The wings themselves, and the back, made it one of our most beautiful birds. They are of an amber-yellow colour, shaded with ash gray, and streaked with small white and brown markings. The pinion feathers and the broad soft feathers of the tail are yellowy-white, barred with light brown, Most remarkable of all is the face, which is heart-shaped, surrounded by a line of gray and yellow featherlets standing out like a ruffle. The eyes are black, a contrast to the pure white of the down that surrounds

them. In the summer evening he can be seen beating up the hedges, pouncing as he goes. When hungry, his capacity is enormous—nine or ten mice. He swallows the mice and small birds whole—the indigestible part being cast up later in the form of a grayish pellet. If a hollow tree, where these birds are likely to sleep during the day, be tapped fairly loudly, it will often drive its tenant into the light. Its exit will invariably be hailed by a chattering chorus of tomtits or finches, who will pursue it. In the bright sunlight the sight is dazzled, but in dull weather it would be able to see quite easily.

A wind-blown copse crowns a hill a mile away from the park, and one day in summer I found the skeleton of a barn owl flung among the thorns. Of the dark eyes—each a wonderful instrument—nothing was left, only a little dust collected in the empty orbits. Ants and flies had long completed their work. The white of

the breast feathers was turned a dull gray by the rain's bedragglement; the muscles of the shoulder had withered, though the sinews were dry and silky. The feet were clenched as though the bird had died in agony after the shot had rung out and it sunk to the ground. An owl rarely dies immediately it is shot; it lies back, if badly hit, resting lightly on its downy wings and stares with a mournful anguish, as though puzzled, and conscious that this is farewell to its mate. Owls pair for life, and, like most birds, their lives are ideal. It seemed to me, regarding the skeleton, a sadness that all that was left of a beautiful bird was a wasted bundle of bones and feathers, flung among the thorns.

*Woo-loo-woo-loo-woo-o-oo!* the brown owl calls in the night. And while I am here on earth, let me be in the fields where I can see the bright stars, and dream as my birds of mystery pass in silence and alone.

*1914.*

# ERNIE

My Devon hermitage is only a sixteenth-century cottage rented at four pounds a year. There are two bedrooms, very small and lime-washed, and a living room with a stone floor and open hearth. A simple place, built of cob, and thatched, with a walled-in garden before it, and then the village street. The churchyard with its elm-rookery is on one side, a small brook below the wall. Even in the hot summer the water runs; I have made a pool of stones where the swallows and martins can go for the mud to build their homes. Beautiful it is to see, in the shadow of the trees, these birds alighting softly on a boulder, or by the pool's edge, and shovelling the red mortar on their beaks. They are timid, restless things, rising into the air at the least noise. I have passed many hours in

watching them, noting the number of times they came in a minute, and how they mix fragments of dried grass and straw with the mud before taking the material aloft. All the while the water murmured, and the birds answered with gentle song. They soon came to know me, and minded not my presence; and I kept away marauding village cats—lean animals with pointed ears and staring eyes; a race existing on rats.

Sometimes a little boy comes and stands by me, and watches them too. He is a funny little fellow, about two and a half years old, with yellow curls and solemn brown eyes. His name is Ernie, and his father is a labourer, a very kind man. He used to spend all his money in the inn, but suddenly took a wife, and drank no more. When Ernie is a naughty boy, he threatens to go "up to pub," and Ernie wails immediately, and is good again.

"I got this one," says Ernie, coming to the cottage door, and holding out in a filthy

paw a piece of cake. "You ain't got this one, ave ee?"

"Go away, Ernie, I'm writing."

"You ain't got this one," he replies, munching the cake, "ave ee, Mis'r Wisson?"

I feel more comfortable in the company of children than with "grown-ups"; and to discourage his talk I put my tongue out, and make a hideous face.

"Ah'll cut ees tongue off, ah wull," he gravely warns, repeating what his mother has said to him when he has done it to her —a frequent happening, I fear; I taught him to do it.

"Good-bye," I shout.

Then he departs, and five minutes later I hear a feeble "*'onk-'onk-'onk*" in my garden. Ernie is driving his car, which he has made from my wheelbarrow, a cinder sifter, and an egg-shaped pair of pram-wheels.

"'Onk-'onk," he cries to the sparrows, "git out, 'onk-'onk." Then on seeing me:

"I got this one. You ain't got this one, 'ave ee?"

"Noomye!" I exclaim, while Ernie goes faster and faster.

This motor-car is not the only toy. The pram-wheels, or "wills," as he calls them, are a source of happiness. A broom tied to the axle acts as a horse, and Ernie goes driving in the road. Other small brats come up, and a puppy dog or two, and great fun they have, often ending up in the stream.

Ernie's mother is always finding him in the water. She cannot keep him away. He goes out in a clean jersey, knickers, and socks, and suddenly there is a cry for Ernie, a rushing past the door, a curse from myself, and a loud wail.

"You come out of that water, my boy! I told you not to go in that water. Little devil, you," cries the exasperated mother.

"Ah'll tull feyther," shrieks Ernie, as he is driven like a porker past the door.

His sobs grow less, and a minute later he comes back and stares at me.

"I got some good water," he informs me. "You ain't got no water, 'ave ee?" And he toddles away for more.

He delights in the filthiest old can or bottle. He loves to kneel down and see the water bubbling in. Sometimes it is a "cup of tea" he has got, or a "glass of beer." And always he has "got this one."

He appears to be wandering about at all hours of the day and night. The life of a recluse in a cottage, remote from ordinary life, has its moments of exaltation, especially in the lovely months of spring and summer, but when the wind sways the leafless trees and whirls the cold rain, it is hard to prevent melancholy. On these occasions I go and have a chat with Ernie's parents, my immediate neighbours. Often I find Ernie asleep at the table, with his curls in the empty plate. The little imp has been all day in the water, or on a long tour in his

motor, and has fallen asleep from exhaustion. He breathes quietly, his mouth droops.

"Poor lill chap, he'm be tired," says Ernie's father; "dear lill boy, he'm be."

It is always the same tender remark. No wonder Ernie loves his father. But this does not prevent the most savage quarrelling sometimes. Then through the wall I hear him yelling,—

"Dawbake!—dawbake!—dawbake!"

And his father's threat (it never materialises into action), "Naughty boy, swearin'! Ah'll tell plicemun!"

"Dawbake!—dawbake!—dawbake!" yells Ernie.

"Ee shouldn't speak tew ees feyther like that."

"Dawbake!" moans Ernie, and hides his curly head at father's knees.

"Could never whip ee," mutters the parent, "ee be so little."

"Of course," I agree, having decided

notions about the relation of the big parent to the tiny child.

Every day it is the same. Ernie in the water, Ernie covered with mud and jam. Ernie holding out pails, bottles, cans, kettles, and food for me to see.

"You ain't got this one, 'ave ee? I got this one. Ah'll tell plicemun of ee, Mis'r Wisson, swearin'! I got my wills. You ain't got no wills. I got the wills."

"Go away, boy!" I shout, as once a schoolmaster used to bellow at me.

He departs, but returns with a cup of muddy water.

"I got a glass o' beer. 'Tis mine, it is. Yaas."

Dirty face, wet boots, disturbing voice, everlasting questions, and possessive boastings—how can I complete the various volumes of *The Flax of Dream*, with Ernie always pestering. I have told him again and again that I wish he would go away to another cottage. But if he were to, I should

be miserable, and miss my long motor-rides with Ernie among the cabbages, while the driver wears an enormous pair of his father's boots. I should miss, too, the accounts of how Ernie has killed rats and rabbits with a stone and how he cut off the policeman's head with a knife because the policeman used a swear word to Ernie.

# A SEED IN WASTE PLACES

*(To M. G. S.)*

To and fro over the heated surface of Fleet Street passed the red omnibuses, a sickly pale vapour coming from the engines. It was a Saturday afternoon in August, and there were few people about. For myself, I had to toil at my useless and fretting work of getting material for one of the big Sunday newspapers. Saturday was the day when the paper became alive, and the Editor more exacting and more like an Egyptian slave-driver than ever. This was from the point of view of the wretched hack-writers who were privileged to work from ten o'clock in the morning till midnight the same day. Possibly the Editor did not regard himself as one so omnipotent, since he was the target for the deadly arrows of the proprietor's wrath

on Tuesday morning, should any blemish in the make-up of the paper be discovered, or any important item of news be missed. Nevertheless, we loathed the Editor on Saturdays, especially at evening. His face grew whiter, and his despairful leer at our non-success in obtaining some facts from a West End flunkey whose mistress had that morning lost a pearl necklace, or a reputation, was most exasperating for men with tired feet and grit-filled eyes.

That afternoon of August London was more arid than ever. I looked with despair for any sign of beauty, something that could take my mind away from dinginess. My mind was drouthy, and the roots of calm thought were sapped. The blue sky overhead made me miserable: I thought of the waves lapping the sunlit sands of the West Country that I knew so well. There the gray stock-doves flew from the bushes growing on the headland cliff sides, and the lark's song was ever in the air. Here

by the church of Mary-le-Strand all nature was dead. True, there were pigeons, but their wings were tinged with soot, and they were alienated from the wild dove whose nest was among the blackthorns. Even the bark of the plane trees was unrefreshed, and guarded by iron cages; my thought was shut in too. My mind was never in my drudge work, however much I tried to force myself to think in terms of sensation and factory-made phrases. Everything was ugly, the competition, the smoke, the grimy buildings.

And then I saw, floating across the shimmering roadway, a few downy seeds. They came from the direction of the Thames. They swung in the motion of the street-air, and the light glistened on their filaments. One drifted to the pavement at my feet, and released a curved brown seed. By its size I knew it to be that of the Yellow Goatsbeard, or John-go-to-bed-at-noon. Immediately the bus-rattle, the whirr of

cab-wheels, and the burnt-oil smell sank away. The seed bloomed in the palm of my hand, and I saw its flowers of pure yellow, and a whitethroat was slipping through the nettles of the ditch. The city was old, but the brown seed was older. Men raised their buildings anew after the great fire, hundreds of years ago; the flower did not change. My mind reached back before the time of the Romans with their tiled baths and chariots; further still, when the first wild settlers made their hut circles by the marge of the wooded river. All the while the dandelion had been blooming so that the seed should be formed. No haste, no strife, no misery: growing in the sunlight. A lovely disk of gold, a summer day, a wandering bee, and the mother-beauty became the child-seed. And this common speck, coming with the moving air to my feet, was as old as the spirit that manifests itself through dull matter in a million million forms and ways.

I dropped the seed and went away, no longer stifled by the weary monotony of my useless work. Then I thought that I would like to keep it, and plant it in some known corner in order to watch its increasing joy as the plant grew in spring, and to take to myself some of its happiness. I searched on the pavement, but it was so small and commonplace I could not see it. A passer-by asked if he might help me: had I lost anything and was it of any value—a gold ring, perhaps? I replied in my enthusiasm that it was of more value than a gold ring, hoping (as ever the dreamer has) that he would share my wonder of this seed in London. He was interested and puzzled, so I told him it was the seed of a sort of dandelion that I sought. He stared at me as though I had said that God was in the Strand, and had just spoken to me; and then he turned away with a smile.

## THE CHANGE: *A Fantasy of Whitefoot Lane.*

*(To J. R.)*

He was standing at the edge of the strip of wood, quite still, and looking towards the east as though at something far away. No wind was blowing.

As I approached he did not move, although my feet made a sighing in the long grass. Abruptly he turned.

"When I was last here, the field swept away, open and free, for many miles. In summer, the wheat grew yellow in the sunshine. Now the houses are nearly to the wood, and the little piece of land left is turned into allotments. But even those are deserted, for they are going to build shortly."

Dreary patches of decaying cabbages, their leaves sodden and drab, were between

the edge of the wood and the fences protecting the small back-gardens. Old broken pails and bundles of bean-sticks littered the allotments; sparrows chirped as they searched the backyards for crumbs.

"This was a field for poppies," he said softly. "Before the stems of wheat stiffened, while the awns and flags whispered softly in the air, the poppies were among the green corn like blood-drops. What untamed colours there were amongst the civilised wheat! The yellow charlock grew every year; we hated the wild mustard, but still it grew. Everywhere the alien creeps in, and hangs fiercely to life. Great big thistles held their spears and purple plumes higher than the grain with the yellow ragwort in August. And the moon daisies, sought by the moths at night. But you think that I am talking foolishly. Perhaps wild flowers are nothing to you."

He looked at me quickly, and in his face was youth. Yet he had said that he

remembered the field before it became part of the suburb: that must have been many years ago.

"Sweetest of all things is wild-flower air," I quoted from old memory.

"Ah! You have not forgotten!"

With a wild poignancy he spoke.

"I am remembering now."

He faced me so abruptly that the hair flung over his forehead. Then he spoke again, and my heart was heavy.

"In the early morning the birds sang sweetly, and the air was pure. I used to creep down the stairs, holding my boots in my hand. The third step from the bottom creaked and had to be avoided. The cat asleep on its rug in the kitchen stirred and stretched and yawned as I opened the door, then curled and slept again. It's funny how I remember things like that so vividly. When my boots were laced, I used to tiptoe to the door, draw the bolt and turn that creaking lock with

its huge key, and then outside into the morning. Sometimes I came to this very place, listening to a nightingale, and his song then was not yearning as it was at night. I watched the warblers at their work of weaving cradles among the brambles. I had a friend in those days, a true friend, to whom I told all the things in my heart, Together we wandered and explored the big woods in the country."

He sighed, while a little wind stirred a leaf upon the oak tree above, a leaf alone among the guarded buds of next spring and the buff oak apples upon the twigs. The leaf made a faint risping as it spun and shook, and he looked up at it, and never had I seen a face so sad.

"Not so long ago that leaf was a bud, opening timorously to the spring sunshine and the lark-song far up into heaven. I wonder if, in its own obscure way, it wondered about the world, and wove a little dream of happiness for ever, like the

dream of a child. The nightingale sings no more when it is spring; he is gone like the wheat and its silky wind-wave. Terry —that was the name of my friend—came to me one day and held out his hand, and said shyly, 'I say, shall we swear life-friendship?' He had been reading some romantic book. After that we went everywhere together. Ah, now you begin to remember the round pond over by the Seven Fields."

"Terry and I would go and fish there at five in the morning. Yes, well may you remember those lovely summer morns, the sun staining the air and charging its loveliness with light and life. We made our own rods of hazel wands, and floats from gray goose-quills and corks. The eagerness with which we put ground bait down the night before in the hope of snaring one of the monster carp that lurked in that little pond! I suppose really that none were there at all, but all through

those springs and summers of boyhood we fished, never catching anything bigger than a small roach or dace. We used to argue about the merits of different baits: aniseed paste, small boiled potatoes, brandling worms and broad beans. Do you know what that pond is like now?" he cried, tragic eyes looking into mine. "All the people from the suburbs have cast their unwanted cats and split boots into the water. There are no fish in it now, not even an eft remains to float to the surface, turn over and show a stain of fire as he swims to the bottom. Everything is dead, dead! When the sun slants through the trees at its edge, you can see the blur of rusting tins and papers deep underneath. But in those days it was beautiful and beloved of a wandering kingfisher. By the shallow drinking-place the cattle came down to ponder, as with soft stare they stood in the mud. Sometimes a bullfinch came, and a turtle dove from the hawthorn: all the

birds loved to splash and ruffle in the water. That little lake in the wood was a place of glamour and romance, especially in later years when I was deeply in love."

The sun came over the houses, the starlings whistled and clucked among the smoke-burnt and red chimney pots. Wives in the houses were preparing breakfast for their men who soon would walk quickly down the pavements towards the station; another day's work in London was beginning.

"Yes, I was deeply in love," the pale stranger continued, "with Louise. That was her name to me, a name I gave her because——"

He faltered and ended. I looked away, for pain had come into his eyes and his voice. The heaped bean-sticks became indistinct as I looked. Again he spoke,—

"When I first saw her, I knew that I would love her, and that she would love me. The bluebells had drooped and faded, their spirits gone to make the sky a deeper

hue, and somewhere in the wind pealed the ghostly chimes of their fragrance. The meadow was glorious with buttercups, and the light reflected upwards from so thick a cluster of golden rivets driven into the grasses glowed on her face as she walked slowly across the field. She wore a print dress, and her brown hair was thick and loosely coiled. But it was her eyes that made her face so sweet—they were gentle like those of a hare. I just stood and looked at her. Then she was gone, and I hid behind a hedge, but she did not look back. Her father was an artist living in a cottage by the farm, and she was his only daughter. When we knew each other, I used to talk a lot with him, and she would listen with earnest eyes upon me, as I could see without actually looking at her. When I did glance at her, she would look on the ground, and then we smiled, and in her cheeks I saw the bramble blossom steal and die. Her father sang the song of Julien

in the opera *Louise*, and would think of his dead wife as he sat at the piano. And I would think of Louise as I first saw her, in her simple dress, bareheaded in the meadow, with a rich golden-brown light on her cheeks like the lacquered ripples of a stream hovering and gleaming under a bridge."

"You are very sad," I said.

"A poet is always sad," he answered.

"Then there should be no poets if that is so. Happiness is greater than poetry."

"You are right," he whispered presently, "but let me tell you my tale before it is too late, for shortly the wood will be down, and on the place where we stand will be houses. And when that happens the last link will be broken."

"Terry and I and Louise became fast friends, and so we grew up. I went away to London in order to learn the tea trade. Terry stopped here with his father, and, instead of sitting on a stool in a dim office,

helped with the sowing and the reaping. One day in summer Louise and I were walking over the Seven Fields, and by a stile I put my arm round her, and she said, 'No, Julien, not yet,' but said it so softly and timidly that I knew she loved me. And I held her, the little thing that she was, in my arms, just to feel her making a small struggle, and to watch her shy eyes and tinted cheeks. But she would not let me kiss her, so I pretended to say farewell to her, but she pressed my hand and told me to stay. And when I asked her if she loved me, she would not answer.

"'Would you break my heart, Louise?' I said. 'You know I love you.'

"'No, Julien,' she answered very softly, 'but I do not want you to break your own.'

"'What do you mean, Louise?'

"But she would not say immediately, and when the time came for us to go back to the cottage, she kissed me nervously on

the cheek and whispered that she might be enough for me now, but not later on; that she was only a silly girl. Of course I loved her all the more, and thinking of her, could not work much during the day at the tea trade, but wrote books at night feverishly in order to immortalise my love. All that summer we walked among the flowers, and one day I asked her to marry me. She shook her head, and her eyes were wet and sorrowful.

"'Not yet,' she whispered.

"'I don't want to marry you now,' I cried, the impetuous, eager fool that I was, 'I only want to know if you love me enough to marry me some day. I want to feel that I possess you.'

"She laughed a little shaky laugh, and I took her close to kiss her; but she drew back slightly, and immediately I felt that I wasn't wanted, and to cover my humiliation I spoke coldly and brutally. Fool that I was!" he cried bitterly.

The drone of a tramcar passing towards Catford along the newly-made high road a mile below the wood rose in pitch as it went faster with its first burden of artisans and factory hands. The stranger brooded, thinking of that time before the field had been built upon. And yet he was still a youth, alone with me in the early hours of the winter morning, standing in the long grass at the eastern edge of the wood. Almost immediately he went on: his voice became wild with yearning.

"Spring came again, with the larks battling over the Seven Fields and the wind anemones rising like wan-white stars above the dead leaves. I fretted with brooding why she withheld herself. I was intensely poetical and equally egoistical. The great artist rises above egoism, the little one is killed by it, and becomes embittered—egoism narrows the view and ruins happiness. But I could not help it—I was held in chains by the tyranny of my

own immature thoughts. Ah, God, if I had only known!"

His thin hands covered the pale face, his shoulders shook, and once again the bean-sticks were a smudge.

"One day I kissed her brutally and suddenly—Louise, more fragile of spirit than the tenderest windflower. One day I crushed her lips with my mouth. She struggled away, and the tenderest girl became a spitfire. She reviled me for a weakling. She said that I had no sense of honour, that I was not worthy of being a man—and then she seemed to shrink, her expression of anger fled, and the tears streaming down her face, she sobbed,—

"'Julien, Julien, won't you make a great effort to kill your egoism? Cannot you see that your intolerance of all people because they have not the same fervour about poetry as yourself will eventually cripple all your powers? You sneer at Terry, who is one of the dearest boys,

because he doesn't want to hear you quote 'The Hound of Heaven'; you sneer at your own father because you say that he doesn't understand you. Oh, Julien, won't you try to alter things for your own sake?'

"'Not for yours?' I sneered.

"'For your own, Julien,' she replied quietly.

"'You don't love me?'

"'Not as you love me, Julien.'

"'No, of course not! You don't know what love is! I can eat my heart out for you; dream, dream, dream in London all the time, pine in the smoke, and no one understands me. No one! The poet is always the outcast, from Christ downwards. The world smashes and destroys genius—the genius that is always trying to make others see the beauty in the world, and make humanity happier.'

"'No, not an outcast, Julien: a beloved friend who will rise above introspection, and be happy. But if that man be caged

by egoism, isn't it best to try to undo the door of that cage? Oh, Julien, if only you would believe."

"She was distressed, and at the thought of hurting her a devil in me rejoiced. She had called Terry one of the dearest of boys. I seized upon the remark.

"'No doubt you are in love with Terry, who is blue-eyed and has such nice wavy hair. Well, go and marry him. *I* shall never ask you to marry me again. Good-bye, Louise.'

"I walked away, and after a while turned to go back to her. We had been quarrelling, at least I had made my pitiable remarks, just where we are standing now. But when I returned she had gone. An insane conceit made me want to hurt her. I wanted to break her spirit—to make her believe in me first: then I would try to alter my views. Already I could see the truth of her remarks. I brooded, and my vitality was sapped. My pride, or conceit,

faltered. Then, when I determined to crave her pity, I found she had gone away to Devon with her father. I wrote a bitter letter to her and left my home. I never wrote again to Louise, nor did she write to me. Not for a year. Then she wrote to me. And I came back. I was already a changed man. Her letter was short, and in it she said that she wished and prayed for my happiness. I came back humbly to see her——"

He put a shaky hand up to his forehead, wet with moisture. His anguish was unbearable. I looked away to the yellow houses with their blue-gray roofs of slate; another tram passed in the High Street.

"She had died," he muttered. "Little sweet Louise had pined away and become ill. One day she got wet through and developed rapid consumption. She was only eighteen—a child. They said it was consumption, but I knew better. *I* killed her. I, the self-flaunted idealist, my eyes

brimming for humanity, had neglected every one around me. I only realised it then. She had known it all the while, because love was a far holier and greater thing to her than it was to me. I thought because I had wanted to pour out my heart's blood at her feet that therefore my love was not selfish, but real, divine! Ah, what did I know about love! I went to the churchyard and saw the mounded grave with a simple stone at the head, and it seemed to me that she was near, wearing the print frock and standing among the buttercups that reflected a gold vapour about her, her eyes dark with a shadow. The maiden eyes, the eyes soft with love, and yet so sad, regarded me, and so sharp was the impression of her standing there that I could hear her pleading, 'Julien, for my sake now, Julien!' In the churchyard I stood alone, looking at her, while in an orchard near the blossom was shaken by the fluttering of goldfinches.

Spring was in the hearts of the wild birds I loved, but my heart was dead. What was there left? To recreate that love and cruelty, and write out of my sorrow and folly! Greater than all written art is life and happiness: a simple living with a beloved and the joy of children's young voices. By the grassy mound I stayed with the shadows. My heart was broken, the more irretrievably because I had broken it myself. Remorse, remorse!"

Memory ceased. Again the dry whisper of the leaf overbore the wintry solitude and song-silence in that little wood in Whitefoot Lane, where the bark of the trees was stripped, and all undergrowth was trampled down. The green woodpeckers would laugh no more in spring: only a few poor windflowers and bluebells would tell of past loveliness. The pale visitant was gone, and with no sound of footfall.

The leaf spun insistently as the wind

passed wearily onwards, and beside me the long green grasses held their drops of light-laden water, nor was there any mark as of feet having pressed there, nor any trail leading away.

With a vague mournfulness I turned and went along the miry path to the roadway, where a tattered fence gaped forlornly. The land would be sold, the trees cut down, and useful houses erected. Perhaps the spirit of the dead haunted that wilderness of torn branches and charred fire-circles, to find rest only where all was changed. Never again would I go back among those poor trees, where in the cruel days of youth sweet hopes had been crushed like a wood-anemone under careless and unknowing feet.

## PROSERPINE'S MESSAGE

*(Written during the spring-like days of October, 1921, when the prolonged drought had been broken by the rains following the equinoctial gales.)*

SOME happy goldfinches flew twittering to the loosened thistle-heads on the sward of the promontory. Their wings fluttered as they took the seeds; they were timorous of alighting on the down, such a soft couch it was, too; their lives were wild and restless. Soon the flock rose and went to other haunts. The brief visitation gave me time to observe the crimson faces, the yellow bars on the wings—they were gone, and I was alone with the spirit of the apple blossom and the blue sky. On the trees of the inland orchards the ungathered apples were ready to fall. Goldfinches always associate themselves in my mind with the May month, when their nests are in the apple trees, but

it is only when summer is gone that the wild beauty of spring—apple bloom time—is yearned for. The goldfinches that now flocked to the headland for the thistledown brought with them a thought of blossom.

For Proserpine has returned—with a child-god in her arms. The nuts in the lane are ready for gathering, the blackberries are luscious, and the partridge coveys have been broken up many weeks. On the ledges of their precipice colony the gulls are no more, the swallows have followed the sun. Many times have I searched the flawless bell-flower of the sky for these ragtailed vagrants, but not even one is to be seen. I cannot understand it; my heart is heavy. Why have they gone so suddenly? The sun shines, and insects are plentiful. Usually the hosts foregather on the single telegraph wire that never ceases to hum between the sun-bleached posts in the sunken lane. This autumn there were no preparations for the great southerly flight.

One night, in the quiet starlight, they disappeared, speeding down the silver stain of the Milky Way towards the big lantern star Formalhaut. Did they flee the coming of the spring goddess? Other things have welcomed her. The lesser celandine flowers are in the hedge-banks, the sorrel is rising, the wild arum will shortly show its purple club in the green sheath, pink campion is blooming. Proserpine, the goddess of spring, has returned to see how her children are faring; and a little child-god is in her arms. With her, too, is the spirit of the apple blossom, symbolling felicity, whispered to me by those fairy heralds, the goldfinches; the loved swallows have not waited to see her. Again I wonder to myself if the penalty of meeting an Immortal is death. Dear swallows, already they brave much during their migrations—the storms, the waves, and the electric wires erected by a debased portion of humanity along their airlines.

The bracken upon the headland has rusted, and the gorse is brown and sapless. Never has there been such an untarnished sky fused with the sea. Those stately swans, the clouds, have sailed over the marge of the earth, leaving not even a downy feather to tell of their heavenly passage. Somewhere in a brake of blackthorn a robin sings frailly, while a red kestrel hangs above for sight of vole or mouse. Croaking deeply a raven wings towards a gully in the mainland where the shepherd pitches his dead sheep. The robin is quiet, and there is no other sound except the croak of the carrion raven: only the mellow sun of autumn, and the grape-frosty air, and the silence. But listen! that sweet birdsong must surely be of the nightingale. There is the low trill, the fluting cadence, the reedy melody that sinks away into silence. But the nightingale does not come to the West Country; only in my mind do I listen to the old and loved voice. The song of the

nightingale is so joyous, so essentially pure spirit, that the listening heart feels an emotion beyond that of earthly life. It is passion more chaste than any Hellenic ideal —it is the voice of the wind, the meaning of the green leaf, the purpose of the seed, the secret of the star. But now as I listen the wistful song, only a little less perfect than Philomel's own, brings poignantly the present before me. However I would dream, it is now October; I can read *The Pageant of Summer* during the dreariness of autumn's chill and winter's murk; but it is not the same. Change is bitter to me, whether of falling leaf or friendship. Leaves must fall, but friends can be steadfast; yet everywhere is bitter change. For many days now the voice has run through the grape-frosty air; always the voice, but never sight of the singer. For hours and days I have sought to find the singing bird, but in vain, in vain. There is genius in the song—a hymn to the life-giving sun, to the light. Somewhere

a rabbit screams in an iron gin; the bird sings on.

Gone is the evejar, that weird moth-taker who pairs for life. By the Nile, with the cuckoo, the nightingale, and the swift, he flaps his mottled wings. The jackdaws and the curlews are with me; there is the seal four hundred feet below hunting the conger eel come back to the deep pools. Of his summer diet of dogfish he must have wearied by now. The orange hawkbits are everywhere at my feet—common weeds, perhaps, but very dear: each yields a thought of beauty, each is a gold coin of our true heritage of the earth. The metal coin that they stamp with the die is false; I would have all the children of the earth spend the dandelions. Therein lies our hope—in the wild flower and the sunlight, in what they symbol—let the children spend these. The more they spend, the richer they will be. They will never forget the flowers: and to remember them is to

yearn towards goodness and beauty. Like the migrants that return, so the impressions of childhood come back to us. And like the swallows that every year grow scarcer, so every generation of man has more to contend with in heredity. This is the price we pay for our metal gold. Let us spend the golden treasure of the dandelions, now, on earth, while we may; so that those to follow may enjoy a more sunlit life. Sitting on the sward above the still blue sea, listening to the sadly-sweet song of the unknown, drinking the grape-frosty air, thus I meditated; perhaps Proserpine had paused in her wandering and whispered to a lonely mortal.

## STRIX FLAMMEA

"WHERE man goes nature ends," wrote Richard Jefferies. But the wild creatures cling to their ancient places with stubbornness, especially in and around London.

One day in summer, intolerably weary, I left Fleet Street very late—or very early. The morning star, Eosphoros the Light-bringer, was sweeping above the eastern line of buildings, the spectral dawn flooding into the concave dusk above. Pausing by the Temple Gardens near the Embankment I became aware of glints of sound from the lawns and under the trees, the cries of questing mice. Then something indistinctly white and with great winnowing wings went over, fluttered vaguely to the grass, rose again, and drifted away. Strix Flammea was in London, hunting in the very heart of its turmoil. My fatigue passed,

and hope came into my heart: I would be as indifferent to my surroundings as my barn owl was to them!

There are owls in the city at night, but never before had I known Strix Flammea visiting. The quavering and mournful plaint of the wood or brown owl has often been heard in Hyde Park and St. James's Park during the darkness. Once, from the top of a motor-bus, I saw one roosting in a chimney cowl near Marble Arch. He looked forlorn in such a neighbourhood. Such a strange object naturally caused many cockney sparrows to assemble for communal vituperation.

Unlike other birds, owls cannot exist where there is noise. Most of their hunting is done by sound, detected by the ultra-sensitive and enormous cavities in the sides of their head, much larger than their eyes.

Maybe you will see Strix Flammea as he floats, a great moth of a bird, round the ancient wharves and docks of London Bridge.

But it will be in the forsaken silence of the morning, when the traffic of the streets is stilled and few people are about, except the human derelicts huddled by London's river and an occasional poet enraptured at life's beauty.

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